

Health Career Pathways Study

**Focus Groups of Regional Youth, Healthcare Training Program Participants,
and Incumbent Workers**

May 2008

**Center for Career Learning
Health Careers Futures
A non-profit supporting organization of the Jewish Healthcare Foundation**

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Abstract

The Center for Career Learning's 2007-2008 research plan is focused on the career ambition, literacy and preparation of current healthcare workers and students who enter into technical health careers. CCL is interested in the influences and decision-making patterns that put healthcare workers on their career path. This study gathered information from high school students, adult students and current healthcare workers in small focus groups of eight to twelve participants. Four focus groups – one group of middle and high school-aged students, one group of adult Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) candidates, and two groups of incumbent healthcare workers in technical and assistant professions were conducted between November, 2007 and March, 2008.

Key findings included:

- The high school-aged participants did not appear to understand the ways in which success in high school coursework affects going to college and achieving a career;
- Most high school participants stated their intent to pursue a four-year college degree, and it was clear from the discussion that they perceived a four-year degree as a necessary step to career success and a two-year degree as inadequate;
- Among adult students and incumbent workers, the cost of tuition and the need to work while pursuing a degree were perceived as the most significant barriers to education for a health career;
- Adult students and incumbent workers perceived that soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, assertiveness, and a caring attitude were more important to success in a health career than academic credentials;
- Forty-four percent of adult students and incumbent workers cited family or personal influences, such as an ill family member, as the primary reason for their choice of a health career. Only four participants cited a career counselor's influence in their choice of career, and only two participants identified a high-school career experience, such as a job shadow or internship experience, as an influence on their choice of health career; and
- Thirteen, or 48 percent, of adult participants transitioned to health care from employment in another sector, five participants entered health care after high school, and four entered health care after college.

Introduction

The Jewish Healthcare Foundation (JHF) and Health Careers Futures (HCF) are committed to patient safety and quality. Through its work with frontline staff, JHF and HCF recognized that the preparedness and commitment of the people who deliver health care are essential to the quality of care provided. In response to the strong need for concerted action on health careers education and training, HCF launched the Center for Career Learning (CCL) in 2006 with the goal of aligning educational pathways with employer demand.

The Center for Career Learning's 2008 research plan is focused on the career ambition, literacy and preparation of current healthcare workers and students who enter into technical health careers. CCL is interested in the influences and decision-making patterns that put health care workers on their current career path. Specifically:

- What *formal influences* (classroom requirements, programs with mandatory participation, graduation requirements, etc.) lead workers to where they are now;
- What *informal, or interpersonal, influences* (parental, peer, teacher, mentor, etc.) lead workers to their present position; and
- What positive and negative *circumstantial influences* (acceptance to the program, award of financial aid or a grant, lack of money, family emergency, unplanned pregnancy, relocation, etc.) had an effect on workers career choices and current position?

This study gathered information from high school students and current healthcare workers in small focus groups of eight to twelve participants. Four focus groups were conducted between November, 2007 and March, 2008. The first focus group consisted of middle and high school-aged girls enrolled in a community-based program; the second focus group of healthcare workers in assistant and technical professions – such as patient care technician and physical therapy assistant – was conducted at a large suburban hospital; the third focus group convened candidates for an Associate's Degree in Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) at a hospital-affiliated training program; and the fourth focus group comprised incumbent healthcare workers was held at a large urban hospital.

Study findings will provide strategic direction for CCL's next phase of partnership and policy initiatives and will allow CCL to organize and provide targeted services to healthcare workers and students at specific points on their career paths. The results of this research will strengthen health careers recruitment and educational pathways and will ultimately contribute to a professional, well-prepared healthcare workforce.

Center for Career Learning

The Center for Career Learning (CCL) was established in 2006 as an initiative of Health Careers Futures, a supporting organization of the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, with the goal of aligning educational pathways with employer demand.

CCL, with support from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, is focusing its preliminary efforts on the ways in which career learning during high school creates a pipeline to technical training for health professions. CCL's strategy is to build capacity for career learning and development of career identity in core high school experiences – such as classroom learning, out-of-school experiences at community-based organizations or after-school programs – and employer engagement.

CCL's current projects include an ongoing research project cataloging the current state of career education in regional schools, community-based organizations, healthcare training programs, and healthcare employers. This research is being conducted in focus groups and survey instruments. The reports in this research series, the Focus Group Report and this report, are available from CCL.

On April 29th, 2008, CCL convened a national Summit: *High Schools & Careers: The New Value Proposition*, in Pittsburgh, PA. Local, regional and national leaders in education, policy, workforce, human services, and employers met to discuss and reformulate high-school career education. As a result, CCL, in partnership with the United Way of Allegheny County (UWAC), has announced a new fellowship program: *Pathways to Health Careers*. The *Pathways* Fellowship will offer the opportunity for 8-10 community-based organizations to learn best practices in career education and implement model practices in their own programs. The Fellowship will run for two years and support two cohorts of Fellows.

Focus Group #1: Middle and High School-aged Girls Enrolled in a Community-based Program

November 27, 2007

Characteristics of Participants

Twelve individuals participated in the focus group conducted by Center for Career Learning staff at the offices of an after-school program, from 5pm to 6pm on Tuesday November 27, 2007. All of the twelve participants were African-American females; ages ranged from 13 to 17. All of the participants were single, had no children, and had completed between eight and eleven years of public-school education. The participants were also all enrolled in an after-school program for at-risk girls located in the East End of Pittsburgh. The girls all attended middle school or high school in the Pittsburgh area and all expected to achieve their high school diploma. Two participants reported participating in a school-based class or program with a focus in health careers.

Three participants reported that they planned to pay for their post-secondary education with jobs, grants, savings, and scholarships, or some combination thereof. Only one participant was employed – as a lab assistant – at the time of the focus group, and two other participants reported holding summer or part-time jobs in the past. In total, three of the twelve participants had formal work experience. One participant reported that she planned to begin a job in the summer of 2008.

Refreshments were provided and participants received a small prize at the end of the session.

Focus Group Topics

After introductions, the group discussed the following: career aspiration; where to learn about careers; how high school education is connected to achieving a career; interest in a college degree; career counseling and career activities; barriers to career success; and knowledge of health careers.

Career Aspiration

Eight participants, or 60% of the group, reported having a career ambition that would require some post-secondary education or training, and two participants reported having a career ambition that would not necessarily require additional education or training after high school. Two participants did not report a career ambition.

The reported careers that would require post-secondary training were:

- Dancer;
- Pharmacist;
- Actress;
- Teacher;
- Obstetrician;
- Psychologist;
- Pediatrician;
- Lawyer; and
- Criminal Lawyer.

The reported careers that would not necessarily require post-secondary training were:

- Beautician and
- Humane Society worker.

Where to Learn about Careers

The following questions were discussed in the large group and the answers represent the group's consensus unless otherwise noted.

Where do you go to get information on careers?

[This program], because it is dependable and also assists with career readiness; also schools and teachers of tech programs.

Where did you get the idea for your career?

From TV, from seeing people (in those careers) on television (*Dancer, Actress*)

By doing my own and my friends' hair (*Beautician*)

Because I like animals (*Humane Society*)

Because I like children (*Pediatrician*)

Because I like to talk to others about problems and how to help them (*Psychologist*)

Do you get "formal advice" on careers?

Only three or four girls indicated that they did get specific, or formal, advice on careers.

The group agreed that they receive career information mostly from their teachers. One participant stated that she received career information from visiting and talking to professionals. Specifically, she spoke to a professional Psychologist, who is a friend of the program's Education Coordinator.

Do you get any career advice?

Most of the girls said they had received career advice. One participant said that she was given advice by her robotics teacher – he suggested that she volunteer at an animal shelter. Other participants stated that their parents and some teachers also gave career advice.

Have you sat down with a career or guidance counselor?

Only a few participants said "Yes." Many did not know they had a career counselor. The group agreed that they hear their teachers talk about careers in class.

If you are interested in being a nurse, for example, where would you go?

The group agreed that they would go to the Internet for information. All of the participants reported that they have access to the Internet. Some reported that they do get career information from the Internet and that they trust the information somewhat. Others would go to the hospital for information, or volunteer at a hospital to find out what it was like to be a nurse. The group also agreed that they could ask a teacher or school nurse for information about a nursing career.

How High School Education relates to Career Achievement

Is learning relevant to accomplishing your career goals?

A few girls say "Yes," but others say that only "some of the stuff done in school" may only be relevant to specific careers. For example, "if you want to be an artist you can take art class." Most of the girls agreed that some "basics, like math and English" do matter, that the electives they take do not matter, and that whether the classes you take relate to your career goals "depends on what you do in life."

Is it easy to see the connection between what you do in class to what you want to do in the future?

The group did not respond to this question.

Interest in College Education

Where do you go for help on getting to college?

Teachers

[The community-based program]
Caseworkers

Are you interested in pursuing a four-year degree?

Ten of the participants raised their hand when asked if they planned to get a four-year college degree. Most of those who raised their hands planned to go to college outside of Pittsburgh, and only a few (2 or 3) indicated that they wanted to go to college in Pittsburgh.

Are you interested in pursuing a two-year degree?

Three participants indicated interest in a 2-year degree. One participant stated that two year degrees were sometimes “not enough school for what you want to do.”

Career Counseling and Career Activities

What does your career counselor help you with?

Most of the students do not know that they had a career counselor and are unable to describe what a career counselor does.

What does your guidance counselor help you with?

Participants agreed that guidance counselors only help with scheduling courses, which did not include an account of career preference or interest. Most of the group did not know “that you are supposed to talk to a guidance counselor about careers.”

What career activities did you remember doing in elementary school?

Computer programs
Field trips - Carnegie Science Center, fire station, aviary
Internet

What career activities do you remember doing in middle school?

Kennywood
Robert Morris College
Cedar Point
Career day; professionals spoke in class
One participant said she had a family court judge who talks to her about her work, but the judge did not discuss the career of interest to the student.

How many of you know how to go about getting an internship?

One participant said she did know how to get an internship.
Eight participants did not know exactly what an internship was.
Others had heard about internships and job shadowing (they asked if it was like take your child to work day) at the program.
Some participants had done some job shadows, and were able to explore a work environment that interests them. One participant went to an activity or job shadow that made her change her mind about that career; she saw that this (changing your mind) was useful as well.

Barriers to Success

What are barriers to career success for you?

School/college – “you have to work hard at it”
Family
Socializing
Trying to get good grades for scholarship
Neighborhoods; friends, the streets pull you back

There was an animated discussion about college scholarships and requirements, and it was clear that students lacked a complete understanding of how to go about seeking scholarships. Scholarships – and paying for college in general – are clearly a worry and were perceived as a barrier. The girls intimated that working hard in school does not guarantee access to college so they must know how to “work” the system.

What motivates you?

Self
Community (church, other)
[The program]

What can make career success easier for others?

Self motivation

How to get young people interested in health careers and knowledge of health careers

How would you get young people interested in health careers?

The group suggested that discussion forums, especially in which high school students can speak to/learn from their peers. Learning from peers would be better than learning from adults lecturing, the group said, because they listen to their peers. Many suggested doing it in a fun way, such as with games or hands-on learning activities.

One participant suggested that career learning should be difficult: “Make it hard – let [students] see the reality of the situation.”

Can you each name a different health career?

The facilitator asked each participant this question in turn. The students came up with: Surgeon, doctor, nurse, pediatrician, [pass], nutritionist, health teacher, gynecologist, obstetrician, podiatrist, health inspector, housekeepers, and optometrist. Students needed help naming different health careers after the first five suggestions and did not always know the correct name of each health career. For example, several students referred to a “baby doctor” instead of a pediatrician.

Concluding Observations

At the beginning of the session, all but two of the participants articulated a career ambition, but when asked again, at the end of the session, more than half of the participants did not answer the question “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Based on this observation, it seemed that not all of the students had a strong career identity or a clear career ambition. In addition, the evident lack of connection between high school coursework and college or career success indicated that the students had abstract ideas about future careers but did not see a clear pathway to career success.

The group seemed to agree that the largest perceived barrier to enrolling in a four-year college was money for tuition, or lack thereof, rather than grades or test scores. This would not be surprising if the students in this group were excellent students, but the Education Coordinator at the program, stated that the participants were not all excellent students. In addition, the students cited social pressures as barriers to career success, such as “friends, neighborhoods, streets that pull you back,” and family, rather than academic barriers or lack of opportunity. However, a majority of students stated their intent to pursue a four-year college degree, and it was clear from the discussion that they perceived a four-year degree as a necessary step to career success and a two-year degree as inadequate.

The fact that the students had difficulty naming more than five health careers without assistance suggests that high school students do not seem to be aware of the true variety of health careers, the correct names

for those careers, or the many different educational requirements of health professions. Continued work in raising awareness is necessary.

The students in this group seemed to be very aware of the career-related activities they have done. It is probable that this awareness is a result of the program, which focuses on career exploration, and not a result of school programs or family influence. The opportunity to interview another group of high school students will help determine if this level of awareness is typical of high school students or if it is particular to this group. However, these students did not seem to be knowledgeable about how to access career support, advice and resources, such as career or guidance counselors, in school. Although most students indicated that teachers and the Internet were good sources of career information, it was not clear how many of the students accessed these sources.

The discussion revealed a disconnect between career ambition and a clear understanding of what was required for career achievement. Even though the students understood that becoming a pediatrician, or “baby doctor” required four years of college, four years of medical school and two additional years of residency, and they appreciated that their lives were littered with social barriers to career success – “friends, neighborhoods, streets that pull you back,” – they did not appear to understand that their career aspirations were limited by their academic performance – the student who wanted to be a pediatrician had a GPA of less than 2.0. This disconnect demonstrates that the students did not understand how relevant academics are to career achievement. Not only did students fail to cite academic barriers to career success, but they also stated that they felt their high school classes were not relevant to their career aspirations. The group saw taking Art as relevant if one wanted to be an artist, but when asked “*Is it easy to see the connection between what you do in class to what you want to do in the future?*” the group did not respond. It is clear from this discussion that learning career awareness and developing career ambition must be a contextualized experience – students should be encouraged to develop career aspirations that are realistic in the context of their interests and life experiences, rather than learn that career ambition is merely something every student should have.

Focus Group #2: Workers in “Assistant” Positions at a Large Suburban Hospital

February 8, 2008

Characteristics of Participants

Six individuals participated in the focus group conducted by Center for Career Learning staff at a large suburban hospital, from 10:00am to 11:00am on Friday, February 8, 2008. All of the six participants were employed at the hospital. Four participants were employed as patient care technicians, one was employed as a medical records coordinator, and the sixth was an occupational therapist. Ages of participants ranged from 24 to 57; the mean age was 38. The group was comprised of two males and four females. Two of the participants were married, three were single, and one was in a domestic partnership. Three of the participants had children.

All six of the participants completed high school with a diploma, one had some college education, three had Associate’s Degrees or postsecondary certificates and two participants did not list their postsecondary credentials. Two of the participants currently employed as patient care technicians were currently enrolled in CCAC and working towards an RN degree. One of these students was enrolled in a tuition forgiveness program to pay for her education. Tenure of employment at the hospital varied from 1 year to 37 years.

Focus Group Topics

After the introductions, the group discussed: pathways to health careers; career influences; career preparation opportunities and barriers; future career goals; and career education today.

Pathways to Health Careers

Three participants, or 50% of the group, transitioned to health care from a non-healthcare job, two participants entered health care right after high school and one participant enrolled in a healthcare certificate program after college. Of the three participants who transitioned from other careers, one chose healthcare because she lost her job in retail, another moved into healthcare from the financial industry after caring for an ailing family member, and the third participant entered healthcare because he wanted something reliable to fall back on.

Career Influences

Five of the participants cited strong family influences on their choice of a health career. In this group, family influence and personal experience were the dominating career influences. Three participants decided to pursue a career in healthcare after caring for an ill family member. One participant had numerous relatives who worked in the hospital in positions from security to nursing to anesthesia technology. The sixth participant cited the influence of a high school career counselor in choosing a health career.

Career Preparation Opportunities and Barriers

When asked how they chose their training programs, participants cited convenience as the most important factor. Of the five participants who received formal training, convenience to work and home was the most important factor. One participant did not have a formal CNA credential; instead she acquired all her skills on the job at a senior care center. This individual did not perceive that her lack of credential affected her job prospects because she had so much experience.

Most participants responded in the affirmative when asked if they knew what to expect in the daily routines of a nursing occupation before they entered the profession. One participant had prior experience working in housekeeping at Mercy Hospital and so was prepared for the rigors of nursing occupations. The group agreed that people who worked as aides made better nurses.

“If you want to be a nurse, you should be an aide first; they make better nurses.”
“They have a better understanding of what an aide does.”

The group cited money as the chief barrier to entering the healthcare profession as a nurse’s aide. Aide’s salaries tend to be low, which makes paying for schooling difficult and working during school almost a necessity.

The group also noted that staying up to date on hospital policies and procedures was challenging and frustrating. They cited incomplete communication of changing policies; not only did some policies and procedures change rapidly, but communication was incomplete – if you were off a day, you might miss the change.

When asked if the hospital supported continuing education for career advancement, or moving up the career ladder, the group unanimously agreed that the hospital encouraged and supported career advancement. Two participants were enrolled in the RN program at CCAC and reported that their supervisors were very supportive and were consistently able to schedule their shifts so as not to conflict with their school schedules. The group reported that the hospital announces continuing education classes, such as Patient Care Technician certification courses. The medical records coordinator confirmed that her department also supported continuing education and tried to accommodate flexible scheduling. One participant commented:

“I never heard of [the hospital] not pushing, throughout every department here, to go on to school.”

Future Career Goals

When asked where they saw themselves in five years and in ten years, one participant stated that she planned to retire within five years. Three of the participants saw themselves achieving their RN degree within five years and achieving a master’s degree and working as a Nurse Practitioner within 10 years. One participant planned to transition out of healthcare to a job in financial advising, but he noted that he would always be able to fall back on his CNA degree.

Career Education Today

The group discussed career preparation for current students throughout the hour-long session. When asked, “If you were talking to high school students, what would you say are the qualities that you need to be successful in health care?” the group began with soft skills. They considered these soft skills to be essential: a caring attitude; a good attitude towards the patients and the work; teamwork skills; independence; and ability to ask for help. When asked what academic skills were necessary to succeed in a healthcare career, the group reached a consensus that an ability to acquire clinical skills on the job was more important than traditional academic skills. For example, participants cited that new workers needed to be prepared for the fact that health care is not a nine-to-five job. One participant stated that, rather than an obvious lack of academic preparation:

“It’s an issue of common-sense skills aren’t being met.”

In addition, the group pointed out that the hospital did a great deal of outreach to ensure that incoming healthcare workers were prepared for the job. For example, the occupational therapist described an OT volunteer program for high school students:

“Before [students] get into any two-year or four-year OT program, they are required to spend so many volunteer hours. Most of the OT aides that we hire here are OT students. They make very good aides because they are actually getting into the profession and they see what the job is actually like.”

“High school volunteers often come in on weekends for four hours and escort patients and help us with activities, so they see what goes on in the department.”

The group noted that there is also a successful volunteer program for patient care technicians.

“This summer we had two young volunteers and they would pass water and answer the call lights; get the patients things – little things that made our lives easier.”

Several participants opined that employers should get involved in career preparation.

“There actually should be some kind of program to link people to a career. Like, these schools work in partnership with a hospital, with a financial institution, or whatever. These kids would actually be on site, in a classroom environment. They could see what the future might look like.”

“The schools ought to set up a volunteer office – to have professionals come in and educate and share their experiences with children.”

The group noted that it is important to begin career exposure early, because students don't often see the connection between school and work, and do not appreciate what they might like about the job until they experience the day-to-day activities.

Concluding Observations

Although the group was small and there was a large range of experience and age, healthcare is a second career for most participants and family influence was often a deciding factor in making this career decision. Except for one participant, who was close to retirement, four of the six participants had career and educational aspirations in healthcare beyond their present position. The group agreed that it was important for employers to support career advancement, and that the hospital was a supportive employer. When discussing career education today, the group agreed that soft skills; the ability to acquire clinical skills on the job, and an understanding of what a nursing occupation entailed were more important to a successful career in health care than traditional academic skills. Finally, the group decided that employers needed to do more to help students understand what health careers are really like. Suggestions included starting career education earlier, volunteer programs, mentor programs and guest speaking opportunities.

Focus Group #3: LPN Candidates at a Hospital-Affiliated Nursing School

February 15, 2008

Characteristics of Participants

Eleven individuals participated in the focus group conducted by Center for Career Learning staff at a hospital-affiliated nursing school from 11.30am to 12.30pm on Friday, February 15, 2008. All of the eleven participants were students in the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) program. Ages of participants ranged from 22 to 46; the mean age was 34. The group consisted of two males and nine females. Seven of the participants were married, three were single, and one divorced. Five of the participants had children. All eleven of the participants completed high school with a diploma, two participants had Bachelor's Degrees and seven participants had some post-secondary education prior to joining the LPN program. All participants had either full time or part time work experience, and four participants were working while enrolled in the LPN program.

Six participants were paying for their education through a tuition forgiveness program, in which students agree to two years of full time employment in exchange for tuition forgiveness. Three participants were funded through the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program, which provides Trade Readjustment Allowances, job search assistance, and training to workers who lost their jobs as a result of import competition. One participant cited loans and grants as the source of payment, and the final participant reported CareerLink as a funding source.

Focus Group Topics

After the introductions, the group discussed: pathways to the LPN program; career influences; career preparation in the LPN program; future career goals; career education today; and suggestions for the LPN program.

Pathways to the LPN Program

In the discussion of how participants chose the LPN program, two chose the program for its reputation, one heard about the program on a radio advertisement, two found it on the internet – the program is rated first on the discovernursing.com web site – two found it through CareerLinks in Denora, one was referred by friends, and three participants came to the program through the support services provided as part of the state's Trade Adjustment Assistance Program. Two participants did not report how they chose the program.

Eight participants (72%) had a career outside of health care before joining the LPN program. In addition to the three participants who made a career switch because their manufacturing jobs were outsourced, two participants reported that they transitioned to healthcare because they were unable to find a job commensurate with their Bachelor's Degrees. The other eight participants chose the LPN program when they were at decision-making points in their life, such as divorce, loss of job, and relocation.

The six participants (54% of the group) who were paying for their education through a tuition forgiveness program cited the tuition forgiveness as a large component of their decision to enroll.

Career Influences

When participants were asked what type of career preparation they received in high school, the answers varied based on the age of the respondent. Younger participants reported receiving some career counseling in high school. They described brief meetings with guidance counselors, limited career fairs, and a guidance course, in which different careers were explored using a computer program. None of the

participants reported the influence of a mentor or a significant job shadowing experience in high school. Older participants described less career counseling. One participant stated:

“My children have a lot more education [in careers]. As far as the basics we’re learning here, they’re learning it in high school.”

Several participants reported that they knew they wanted to be a nurse or an LPN while still in high school, but did not immediately pursue a career in nursing. These participants cited barriers such as cost, not being ready for more school, and the many prerequisites.

Of the eleven participants, four participants stated that they had a role model – someone they knew working in healthcare – who had an influence on their decision to enter the LPN program. All four of these role models were family members.

When asked what experiences and skills were most useful to their career success – and particularly to their success in the LPN program – participants agreed that working as a nurse’s aide was critical to success in the clinical portion of the program. Some comments included:

“It teaches you patience.”

“Both of my children want to be nurses. My advice to them is: ‘Wait. Work as a nurse’s aide for a little while, and then decide.’”

Participants also agreed that skills from previous careers or educational experiences – such as patience, time management, critical thinking and communication – helped them be successful in the LPN program. Interestingly, the group also agreed that very little of their past educational work was relevant to their success in the LPN program. Participants had previous educational experience in liberal arts, business, and manufacturing, and agreed that, while the interpersonal skills were very helpful in the LPN program, the content of their previous coursework did not translate.

Career Preparation in the LPN Program

Participants discussed the career services and supports at the School of Nursing and listed a job shadow day and a recruitment day as the most visible services. Participants stated that the recruiters the School tended to be representatives of a large hospital system, which was a benefit because it made it easier to find a job and thereby fulfill their tuition reimbursement commitment. However, participants agreed that finding a job was their sole responsibility, and it was a responsibility they took seriously.

When asked whether the clinical rotations or part-time hospital work was what they expected, the group unanimously agreed that they were well-prepared for clinical work when they achieved their degree. One participant stated:

“We had clinical time the second week of the program.”

Several participants had worked as nurse’s aides prior to enrolling in the LPN program, and these participants felt very well-prepared, based on their prior experience in the clinical setting.

Future Career Goals

The eight participants who had committed to the tuition forgiveness program expected to find jobs in a large hospital system after graduation. Areas of high interest were in-home care, hospice, and critical care.

Nine participants (81%) reported that they planned to pursue their RN degree; most indicated that they chose to achieve an LPN degree as a step towards an RN because of the tuition forgiveness program and the work experience they would accumulate between degrees.

When asked where they see themselves in five years, responses varied widely. One participant planned to have achieved her bachelor’s degree in nursing and be working on her master’s degree. Most

participants agreed that steady employment was their primary five-year goal, but seven participants stated that they were considering additional education within five years. Most participants saw themselves as advocates for the nursing profession in their future careers.

Career Education Today

Participants were asked what students today could do to learn more about careers. The group agreed that job shadowing was the best way to learn about a career. Participants stated:

"It's so much more helpful if you can see what somebody else is doing, or if someone could suggest a career choice, as opposed to nothing."

"Many kids don't know what's out there [in terms of careers] and what they're capable of."

Participants also agreed that students should consider voc-tech and find careers in skilled trades. As one participant stated:

"There's a lot of money to be made in the finer art of cabinetry, plumbing, electrical work. Kids who aren't that sophisticated with computers and don't have great grades can make good money in the trades. There are lots of opportunities for specialty labor."

Other group members stated that, in addition to job shadowing, guest speakers and mentors should come into the classroom and lead by example. One participant had already spoken to high school students about nursing and options for two-year degrees.

One participant described his experience in the voc-tech machine shop during high school as meaningful to his first career choice:

"I went to voc-tech for machine shop during junior and senior year and I saw what the work was like and what I would be getting into if I chose that career. It was a good thing for me to have as I chose my career."

Suggestions for the LPN Program

The participants were asked: What improvements would you make to this program in terms of how well it is preparing you for your career?

The group agreed that the program was excellent, but suggested that recruiting materials and information sessions be clear about how truly rigorous the program is. The group also agreed that learning about medications gradually, and building up to clinical time with patients, would help reduce the stress associated with beginning clinical work.

Several participants suggested that the pharmacology class, which was taught online, would be more worthwhile if the format had been live and the instructor easily accessible. Comments included:

"Even though I looked in the book and asked questions online I don't think I learned as much as I would have if the instructor had been present."

"I think the online course should not have been pharmacology – it should have been a different class."

Participants also made financial suggestions, and agreed that completing school would be much easier if tuition forgiveness included a small stipend for living expenses. Most participants noted that the attrition rate was large – only about 11 students remained from an incoming class of 30. The group felt that the stress of juggling the program, financial and family matters was too much for some students, and added that a grant or stipend for living expenses might reduce the attrition rate.

When asked what the program does to support students, the group responded enthusiastically that the instructors and tutors were helpful and committed to the students. Comments included:

"The instructors we have go above and beyond. They are wonderful."

“The instructors are available over weekends via email; they take their personal time to help us.”

The group also agreed that the program’s rigorous testing was responsible for the high pass rate on the licensure exam, and were comfortable that they would be prepared to pass their exams when the program was over.

Concluding Observations

Although the LPN candidates in this group had come to health care from a variety of different backgrounds, ranging from high school to the manufacturing sector, the group agreed that they felt the program was preparing them well for their chosen profession. The group agreed that the immersion in clinical work and experience was the primary reason they felt so prepared for their professional roles.

In the discussion of career preparation today, most of the participants agreed that today’s high school students not only need to look beyond monetary rewards when choosing a career but also should consider voc-tech options before jumping in to postsecondary education. However, if students were considering a health career, the group agreed that soft skills such as communication, assertiveness and team work were more important to career success than academic credentials.

Focus Group #4: Workers in “Technical” Positions at a Large Urban Hospital

February 21, 2008

Characteristics of Participants

Ten individuals participated in the focus group conducted by Center for Career Learning staff at a large urban hospital from 11:00am to 12:00pm on Friday, February 21, 2008. All of the ten participants were employed at the hospital. Two participants were employed as Pharmacy Technicians, two were employed as Medical Lab Technicians, two were employed as Respiratory Therapists – one manager and one technician – one was employed as a Physical Therapist Assistant, one as an O.R. Technician, one as a Radiology Technologist and one as a Supervisor in Imaging Services. Ages of participants ranged from 25 to 56; mean age was 45. The group was comprised of one male and nine females. Six of the participants were married and four were single. Four participants had children.

All six of the participants completed high school with a diploma, three participants had completed their Bachelor's degrees, four had completed Associate's degrees and five reported certification credentials for their current position. None of the participants were currently in school. Tenure of employment the hospital varied from 1 year to 27 years.

Focus Group Topics

After the introductions, focus group topics were: pathways to health careers and career influences; career preparation opportunities and barriers; future career goals; and career education today.

Pathways to Health Careers and Career Influences

When asked how they found their way into a health career, the group recounted a variety of pathways. One participant came to a health career while in college, bouncing from major to major, two participants entered the field of health after losing their job in manufacturing, and two participants entered a health profession right out of high school. The other five participants did not report what they were doing before they found a job in health, but gave the impression that they did not envision themselves in a health career while they were in high school.

One of the participants who found a job in health right out of high school cited the influence of her career counselor when she chose her career. The influence was positive; the career counselor helped her take a career aptitude test, which suggested the job of Medical Lab Technician. Other participants stated that a job shadowing and family influences were important in their choice of career. Participants stated:

“I shadowed [an x-ray tech] and I liked it – with the exception of enemas!”

“My aunt was a pharmacy technician, and I helped her study for her boards, so that's how I found out about the career.”

Several participants acknowledged that their own experiences as patients, or the patient experiences of family members, influenced their decisions.

“I know of [colleagues] who were pretty ill and then they recognized the different jobs that everyone was doing to care for them. And later on, they looked into it for that reason.”

“I didn't realize there were so many health care career options out there. I didn't get my job [as a respiratory therapist] until I had a son with asthma, and I had a respiratory therapist come up and give him treatments.”

Career Preparation Opportunities and Barriers

A number of participants stated that job shadowing or volunteer experiences helped them prepare for the reality of their jobs.

"I'm a physical therapist assistant, and we had to do – it seemed like 100 hours of volunteer work before we applied to the program so that we were exposed to all aspects [of the job]."

The group agreed that the greatest barrier to going back to school for a health career is the cost of some of the programs, and the challenge of keeping up in a rigorous program and working full-time.

When asked about opportunities for career advancement and on-the-job training, the group agreed that productive professional development time was scarce and cited barriers such as call-offs, scheduling and location. The pharmacy technicians reported that it was difficult to attend scheduled training sessions because when the team saw there was training scheduled, people were more likely to call off. In such a case, people who had been scheduled for training got pulled on to a shift and so missed their training.

"In our department, you could be scheduled for two weeks of training and everybody looks at the schedule and says, 'No, wait, we've got some people scheduled for training. I can call off because there is someone to cover my shift!' "

The O.R. technician cited poor scheduling of training sessions as a major barrier. In the O.R., there is usually only one training session per day, which means that workers on the night shift do not get a chance to participate. Finally, participants suggested that off-site trainings would be more productive than the current on-site trainings. In on-site trainings, the shift is often under-staffed, and workers tend to go in and out of the training sessions to their work on the floor – the result is an unproductive training session for everyone.

"Lots of times when we get new equipment, we will have an in-service or have the vendor come and provide the in-service. But it's usually best if you can have a person go to a facility away from work to do this. Because we all know that the best intention is to have low staffing that day, as far as patient volume, so you can actually learn something. But most times, that doesn't happen. So you're still trying to learn something new, complete the tasks you have to do that day, and then you have staff running in and out of the room instead of staying put and trying to learn. So it's a circus sometimes."

When asked about employer support for continuing education and advancement, several participants responded that their positions did not have a place to move up to. For example, the physical therapist and medical lab technician stated:

"In physical therapy, there is really nowhere to go."

"There's nothing [to move up to] in the lab."

Future Career Goals

When asked where they saw themselves in five years, responses ranged from retirement to teaching. Five participants stated that they would be in the same job, since they liked their work and their working environment, four participants anticipated heading back to school, either for additional professional certification or Master's degrees, two participants thought they would be retired within five years, one participant aspired to move into health education as a teacher, and one participant hoped to be working at her job full-time. Several participants did not report their career goals.

Career Education Today

Throughout the session, the group discussed the theme of career education today, and addressed questions such as: How could current students be more prepared for a career in health care; and what skills are necessary to succeed in a health career?

The group unanimously agreed that many new healthcare workers were not prepared for the realities of the job. Specifically, the group stated that new hires that came directly from school were not aware of the 24-hour shift schedule, and cited many cases of attrition as a result of this shock. Although several participants had worked on a shift schedule while in school, the group agreed that:

“Somewhere along the line, somebody should have clued them [the students] in.”

The group also agreed that healthcare programs did an adequate job of training students in the necessary technical skills, but that training in soft skills, such as problem-solving, communication, assertiveness and time management was lacking.

“In my opinion...the ongoing problem is not the technical aspect of the job...it's the constant problem-solving, prioritizing of tasks, and communication.”

“We lose a lot of people just because they are intimidated by speaking to the doctors or to the nurses or to another service – they are not really prepared to be assertive.”

Further, several participants pointed out that the job is structured to promote task-oriented work rather than patient-oriented work, so the schools and individuals aren't really at fault; the system needs to become more patient-oriented.

Finally, the group stated that they wished they had learned more about the work that other services do, because some of the expressed frustration was a result of the fact that other services operate in silos.

‘It would have been nice to have been more prepared [in school] and realize that other disciplines have no idea what you do.’

Concluding Observations

In summary, participants in this group were influenced by family members, personal experiences, early career experiences, and, in one case, a career counselor, when they chose their health careers. A number of participants cited specific early career experiences, such as a job shadow or volunteer work, which brought them to their current health career.

The group also acknowledged barriers to entering a health career. These barriers included the cost of education, particularly having to work while pursuing a degree. The group also discussed perceived barriers to continuing education and career advancement, including:

- Lack of support for training – staff tend to call off when a training is scheduled, rendering those who were scheduled for training unable to attend the session;
- Scheduling – often, trainings are only scheduled once per day, which makes it difficult for workers on all shifts to attend; and
- Location – when in-service trainings are held at the hospital, staff tend to run in and out to attend to their work, disrupting the training for the group.

Finally, in discussing career education for current students, the group agreed that current students had the technical skills necessary to succeed in a health career, but lacked the soft skills, such as communication, team work and assertiveness, that are critical to daily work.

Conclusions

Focus groups raise issues for further investigation; they seldom provide answers. This investigation revealed a number of patterns in career influences, career decision-making, and perceptions of success in health careers among students and incumbent workers.

Limitations

In the context of this study, three focus groups convened incumbent healthcare workers or adults pursuing an LPN degree, and only one focus group explored the opinions and career ambition of high school students. In addition, the group of high school students was not a representative sample – the group was all-female – and so it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions about career pathways from comparisons between the high school group and the adult groups at this time. However, inferences could be made if this project were extended to include at least one additional, representative focus group of high school students.

Career Influences

Nevertheless, interesting inferences result from comparing the three groups of adult participants. Each of the three adult groups discussed the themes of pathways to health careers and career influences; career preparation opportunities and barriers; future career goals; and career education today. Of the 27 adults who participated in a focus group, 12, or 44% cited family or personal influences, such as an ill family member, as the primary reason for their choice of a health career.¹ Only four participants (15%) cited a career counselor's influence in their choice of career, and only two participants (7%) identified a high-school career experience, such as a job shadow or internship experience, as an influence on their choice of health career. Interestingly, these influences on career choice cluster by age. The six participants who cited career counselor or early career experience as a primary influence on their choice of career were all younger than 30, well below the median age of 39. Although participants of all ages identified personal and/or family influences on their choice of career, these responses indicate an emerging trend of institutional or programmatic influences (career counselors, job shadowing or volunteer experiences) on career choice among younger workers.

Choosing a Career in Health Care

It is also interesting to note the point at which the adult participants chose a career in health care. Thirteen, or 48% of adult participants transitioned to health care from employment in another sector, five (19%) participants entered health care after high school, and four (15%) entered health care after college. Five participants did not report how they arrived in the healthcare sector. Unlike reports of career influences, these data are not different across age groups, indicating that young people are not entering health careers right out of high school. This information suggests that health career education and recruitment efforts should continue to focus on high school students while reaching out to incumbent workers in other fields.

Necessary Professional Skills

Finally, the three adult groups – particularly the groups of incumbent healthcare workers – agreed that strong soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, ability to learn clinical skills, and assertiveness – were more important to a successful career in healthcare than academic skills or credentials. Not surprisingly, group suggestions for career tended to include activities that emphasized soft skills and on-

¹ Although a focus group of parents as not included in here, the Center for Career Learning's informal surveys of parents of high school-aged children (conducted in March of 2008) show that both the parents, and their children, receive most of their career information from family members, the Internet, or television.

site experience. Group suggestions were consistent with current programs and initiatives in career education and included job shadowing, volunteering and mentoring.

Questions for Further Study

These results raise a number of interesting questions. For example: If career development programs for high school students are ostensibly focusing on the skills incumbent workers describe as critical to professional success, why do incoming workers lack these skills and why are graduating high school students not choosing health careers? One possible answer is that career development is too focused on duplicating school work rather than reinforcing soft skills. Another possible answer is that awareness of human behavior should be incorporated into career development and incumbent worker training. For example, perhaps incumbent workers need to be trained to help new employees adjust to the communication and teamwork paradigms of the new work environment. Health Careers Futures and the Center for Career Learning are working to answer this question by developing and disseminating a survey to a large sample of incumbent healthcare workers and healthcare employers; conducting a detailed examination of the current condition of career development programs; and sponsoring a Fellowship program for community career education providers.

This investigation also raised questions about the role of guidance counselors in shaping career ambition. Although several of the younger adults cited the influence of a career counselor in choosing a health career, the high school students did not seem to be aware of the career counselor's existence, let alone his/her role. Anecdotal evidence suggests that career counselors are both overwhelmed by their workload (in Pittsburgh, there are four career counselors for ten high schools) and lacking training and resources to adequately address students' career needs. The Center for Career Learning is exploring the possibility of offering a Fellowship program for career counselors that would provide relevant training and resources to address this need.

Finally, this project revealed that high school students do not feel that their classroom studies are relevant to their career ambition or connected to their career achievement. This observation raises the question of how to encourage students to make and understand the connection between academics and the potential for career achievement. What are the differences between students who appear to make this connection and students who do not? As the saying goes, this is the \$64,000 question. In related work, the Center for Career Learning recently convened a Summit, titled *High Schools & Careers: The New Value Proposition*, of national experts in workforce, human services, education and employers to address this question. Although the Summit addressed this issue, CCL staff is hopeful that the proceedings will spark new investigations and enhance existing work in this field.