

Eleven Year Gains: Project QUEST's Investment Continues to Pay Dividends



Anne Roder and Mark Elliott
Economic Mobility Corporation

September 2021

On the Cover: Yvette Rivera

Yvette Rivera was 34, married and the mother of three children when she picked up a Project QUEST flyer at her local library. After graduating high school, Yvette married and began working full-time as a medical assistant. Her supervisor often encouraged her to go back to school, but Yvette's family needed her income and her parenting responsibilities seemed to put getting an education out of reach.

The flyer highlighted QUEST's tuition and financial support, which persuaded Yvette to apply. She had to give up her medical assistant job, but made ends meet as a home care provider, staying overnight with an elderly person while taking classes during the day. Three years later, she graduated from San Antonio College with an Associate Degree in Nursing.

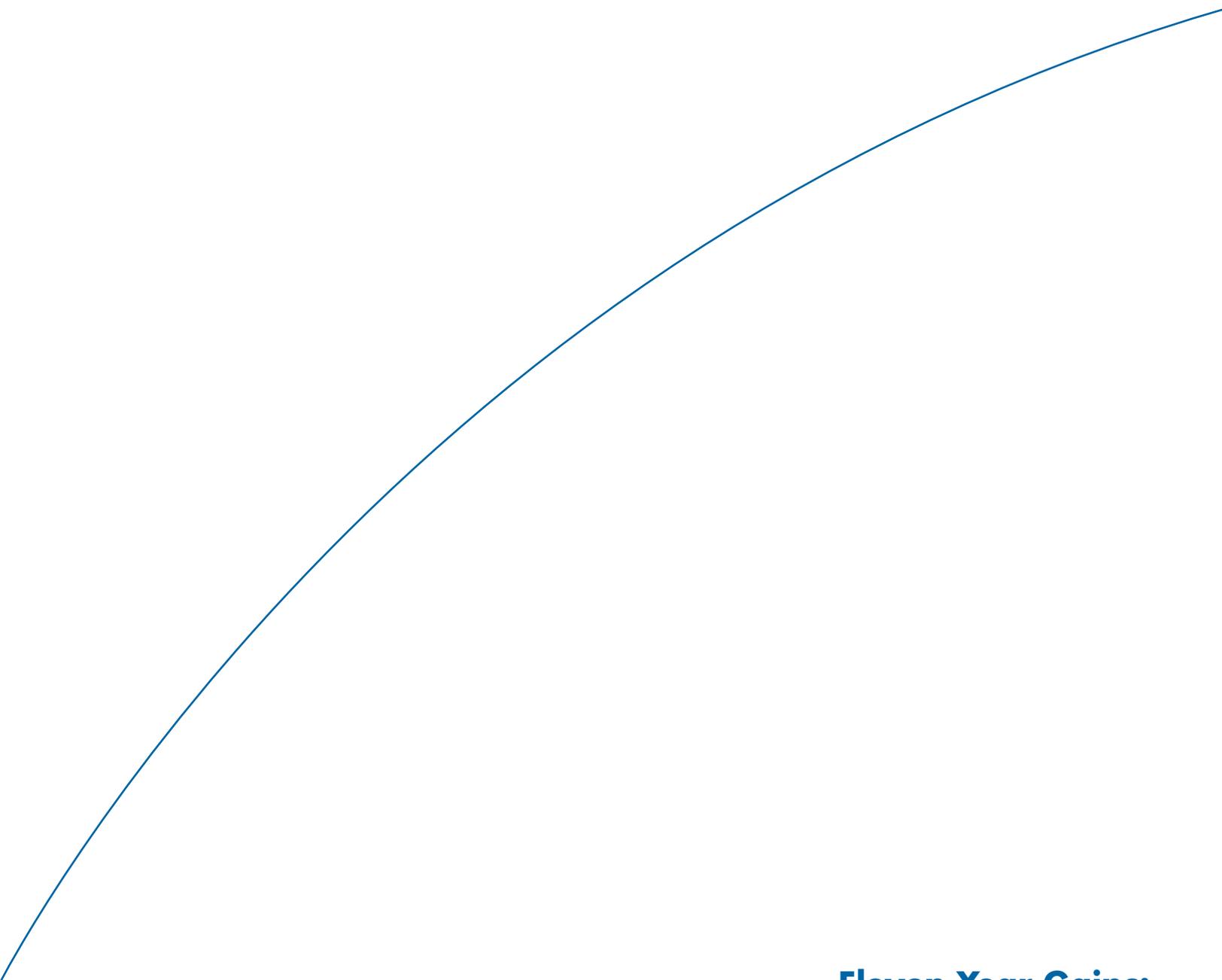
Yvette gets teary when she talks about how QUEST helped her. "It was a lot of emotional support. They knew I was smart but I had a lot of emotional barriers. They gave me the drive to not give up."

Now 47, Yvette has a Bachelor of Science in Nursing and a Master's of Science in Nursing Education, and is the Manager of Service Coordination for the STAR Kids health insurance program for disabled, low-income children at the University Health System in San Antonio. Her salary just eclipsed \$100,000 a year.

Although her marriage ended eight years ago, Yvette has been able to help her children become successful. Her oldest is a graduate of Texas A&M and is self-employed, her middle child has started her own business and her youngest just graduated high school and has enrolled in the nursing program at San Antonio College. She proudly notes that she has paid for her children to go to college.

Yvette credits her experience at Project QUEST for much of her family's success. "Project QUEST saw my potential and just kept me going. They never lost sight of me. It turned my life around and has given opportunity for my children to be successful."

Cover photograph: Vanessa Velazquez.



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The Economic Mobility Corporation (Mobility) identifies, develops, and evaluates programs and policies that enable disadvantaged individuals to acquire the education, skills, and networks needed to succeed in the labor market so that they can support themselves and their families.

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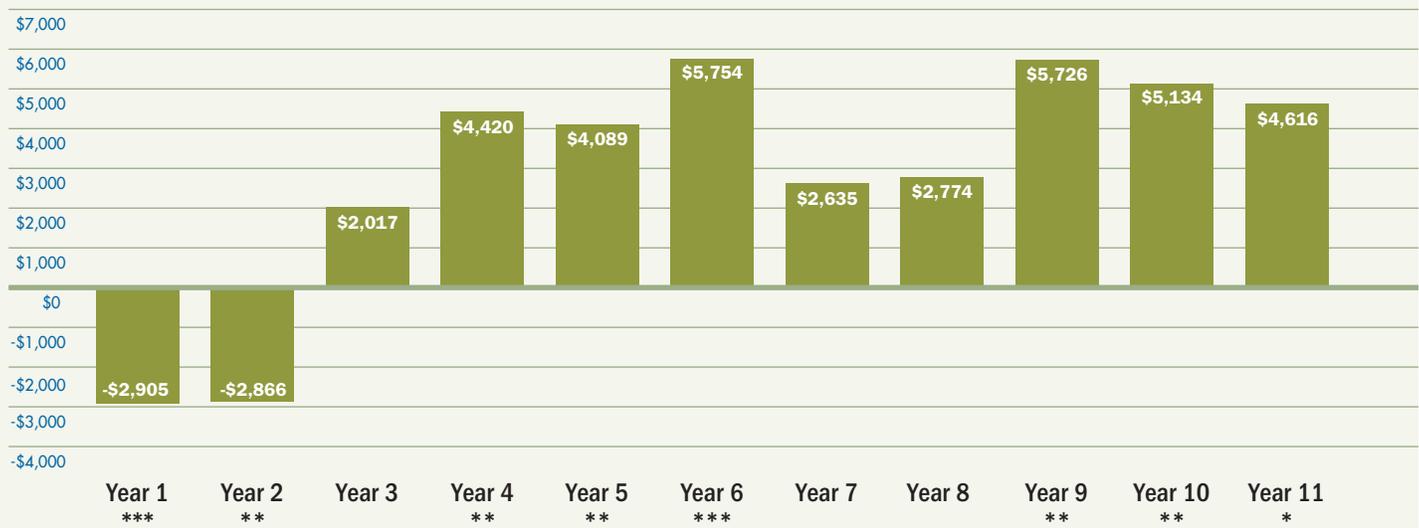
Summary

Project QUEST, founded in San Antonio, Texas in 1992, provides financial, academic, and personal supports to help adults with low incomes obtain postsecondary educational credentials and access well-paying jobs in strong sectors of the local economy. Economic Mobility Corporation (Mobility) conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) study of Project QUEST to assess its impacts on credential attainment and earnings among individuals pursuing health-care careers. We previously reported that Project QUEST had large, positive impacts on participants' credential attainment and earnings during the nine years after study enrollment. With financial support from Arnold Ventures, we worked with the Ray Marshall Center at The University of Texas at Austin to examine whether the program's impacts continued to be sustained eleven years after study enrollment, using state administrative data on earnings and National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data on postsecondary education outcomes.

In this report, we present findings on Project QUEST's impacts and compare the program's benefits and costs. Key findings follow.

- QUEST participants continued to earn significantly more than individuals in the control group eleven years after study enrollment (**Figure 1**). These are the longest sustained earnings impacts ever found in a rigorous evaluation of a U.S. workforce development program.

Figure 1 Project QUEST's Impact on Average Annual Earnings during Each of the Eleven Years after Study Enrollment (N=410)



Note: Earnings impacts are reported in constant 2019 dollars and represent differences in average annual earnings between the QUEST treatment group and the control group in each year. Statistical significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

- Over the entire eleven-year follow-up period, QUEST participants earned an average of \$31,395 more than control group members (in 2019 dollars).
- Project QUEST increased postsecondary credential attainment by 13 percentage points and more than doubled the attainment of a health-care credential over the eleven-year period.
- The earnings gains that QUEST participants experienced far exceeded the costs of the program and participants' college attendance.

Project QUEST provides an array of supports to improve completion of postsecondary credentials and partners with colleges, training providers, and employers to ensure that graduates have the skills to meet employers' needs. Project QUEST's results provide strong evidence of the potential long-term benefits of investments in strategies to help adults with low incomes obtain postsecondary credentials and access well-paying careers.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and Metro Alliance—two community-organizing groups in San Antonio, Texas—observed local employers recruiting workers from outside the metropolitan area to fill well-paying jobs, while local residents struggled in low-wage jobs that did not enable them to support their families. In 1992, COPS and Metro Alliance founded Project QUEST to help San Antonio residents gain skills to meet the needs of employers in strong sectors of the local economy. Project QUEST provides personal, financial, and academic supports to help individuals complete occupational training programs at community colleges and professional training institutes, pass certification exams, and obtain jobs. Project QUEST's services include the following:

- financial assistance to cover tuition and fees for classes, books, transportation, uniforms, licensing exams, and tutoring¹
- remedial instruction in math and reading to help individuals pass college placement tests
- counseling to address personal and academic concerns and provide motivation and emotional support
- referrals to outside agencies for assistance with utility bills, child care, food, and other services, as well as direct financial assistance with other supports on an as-needed basis
- weekly meetings focusing on life skills, including time management, study skills, critical thinking, and conflict resolution
- job placement assistance, including help with writing résumés and interviewing, as well as referrals to employers that are hiring

In 2005, Project QUEST agreed to take part in a rigorous evaluation using a randomized controlled trial design to assess its impacts on participants' earnings.² Between April 2006 and October 2008, 410 individuals enrolled in the study, of whom 207 were randomly assigned to the treatment group, which could receive Project QUEST's services, and 203 to the control group, which could not. Because individuals were randomly assigned, at the time of study enrollment the two groups were equivalent on measured characteristics, such as age, prior education, and work experience, and unmeasured characteristics, such as motivation. Therefore, any differences found in their outcomes can be attributed to Project QUEST's services. Additional details regarding the study design and the final sample are provided in the appendix. All study participants are included in the analysis, regardless of whether they received services as intended. In this report, we refer to all members of the treatment group interchangeably as "the QUEST participants" or "the QUEST group."

In our previous reports, *Escalating Gains: The Elements of Project QUEST's Success*; *Nine Year Gains: Project QUEST's Continuing Impact*; and *Nine Year Education Gains: Project QUEST's Impact on Student Success*, we presented Project QUEST's impacts on employment, earnings, and postsecondary education attainment six and nine years after study enrollment.³ With support from Arnold Ventures, the study was extended to examine whether Project QUEST continued to have positive impacts eleven years after enrollment. The findings are based on administrative records, including Texas Workforce Commission data on quarterly earnings and unemployment benefits receipt, and NSC data on postsecondary education outcomes. Mobility contracted with the Ray Marshall Center at The University of Texas at Austin to access and analyze the data.

This report presents the study's findings regarding Project QUEST's impacts on employment and earnings, college enrollment and completion, and receipt of unemployment insurance benefits through year eleven. We also compare Project QUEST's net costs to its net benefits to assess the value to society of investing in its model.

Study Participants and Targeted Postsecondary Programs

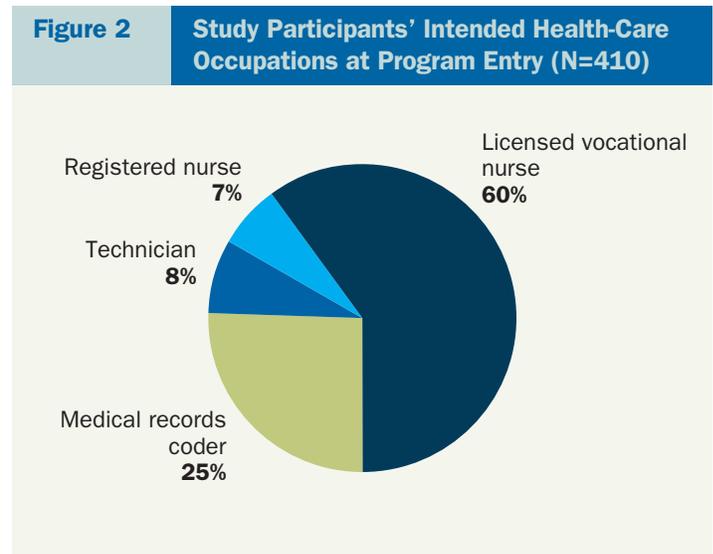
During the study enrollment period, Project QUEST recruited individuals who were interested in, but not currently attending, college classes. This group included both those who needed to improve their basic reading and math skills before they could enroll in college-level classes and those ready to enroll. The study focused on individuals who were pursuing training for health-care careers, the sector in which Project QUEST had worked the longest and served the most people. San Antonio College and St. Philip's College were Project QUEST's primary community college partners during the study period.

Project QUEST staff thoroughly screened applicants to determine their eligibility, evaluate their aptitudes and interests, and match them to appropriate careers and training. Career counselors worked with applicants to develop academic plans that included necessary courses and timelines for completion. Counselors also helped with developing budget plans to determine whether applicants' income would cover their expenses during training. Applicants presented their plans during an interview, after which staff decided whether to recommend them for enrollment. Recommended applicants were submitted for random assignment. Career counselors worked with the individuals assigned to the treatment group, either inviting them to attend remedial classes held at Project QUEST or assisting with the college enrollment process. While control group members did not receive any further support from Project QUEST, the intake process provided them with a *de facto* road map for completing a certificate or degree program for their targeted health-care occupation at a local community college—which may have contributed to improving their outcomes as well.

As presented in **Table 1**, most study participants were female, Latino, had a high school diploma, and had children under age 18 at the time of study enrollment. Most (69 percent) were between the ages of 25 and 64—older than traditional college-age students. Forty-five percent had previously attended college without obtaining a degree. While 84 percent had worked in the previous year, they remained poor—average annual earnings among all participants were only \$13,323 (in 2019 dollars).

Most study participants (85 percent) sought to enter non-degree programs, with 60 percent intending to enroll in licensed vocational nursing certificate programs. A quarter wanted to enroll in a medical records coder training that was a continuing education program for which students earned a certificate of completion but no college credits. Another 15 percent of participants were interested in associate degree programs, including registered nursing, and radiography, respiratory therapy, sonography, and surgical technician programs (**Figure 2**). **Table A2** in the appendix provides information about the course requirements and program length for each of the health-care career tracks and the type of credential conferred. About 63 percent of the QUEST participants took part in remedial classes, including those offered by QUEST and the community college partners. Once they completed the remedial and prerequisite classes and entered the career track programs, students were required to attend class full-time. After students completed their coursework and clinical rotations, they were required to pass a national certification exam, and in some cases a state exam, before working in their chosen professions.

Table 1		Study Participants' Characteristics at Program Entry (N=410)
Female		88.3%
Latino		74.1%
African American		13.9%
White		9.5%
Age 18 to 24		30.7%
Age 25 to 64		69.3%
Had any children under age 18		71.2%
Married		27.6%
Had a GED		25.1%
Had a high school diploma		70.2%
Had a college degree		4.6%
Previously attended college but did not earn a degree		44.9%
Employed at any time in the past year		84.4%
Average annual earnings in the past year (in constant 2019 dollars)		\$13,323



Project QUEST's Impacts on Employment and Earnings

Project QUEST's mission is to improve the lives of San Antonio residents by helping them gain the skills needed to access well-paying careers. Across the eleven years after study enrollment, QUEST participants on average earned \$31,395 more than control group members (in 2019 dollars).⁴ As shown in [Figure 3](#), QUEST participants earned substantially more than control group members in the third through eleventh years after study enrollment. In the first two years, QUEST participants earned less than control group members as many either reduced their work hours or stopped working to attend college. Differences in average annual earnings between the QUEST group and control group were statistically significant and exceeded \$4,000 in six of the last eight years, including the most recent three years.⁵

Figure 3 Average Annual Earnings during the Eleven Years after Study Enrollment among All Study Participants



■ QUEST group (N=207) ■ Control group (N=203)

Note: Earnings are reported in constant 2019 dollars. Figures are for all study participants, including those with zero earnings during each period. Statistical significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

As shown in [Figure 4](#), more than 80 percent of QUEST participants were employed at some time during each year starting in the fourth year after study enrollment. Employment rates for the control group were similar to those of the QUEST group in most years through year eight, indicating that earnings differences between the groups were due to QUEST participants either working more hours or earning higher wages than control group members. In years nine through eleven, employment rates remained steady for the QUEST group but began declining for the control group, and differences in employment rates in years ten and eleven were statistically significant.

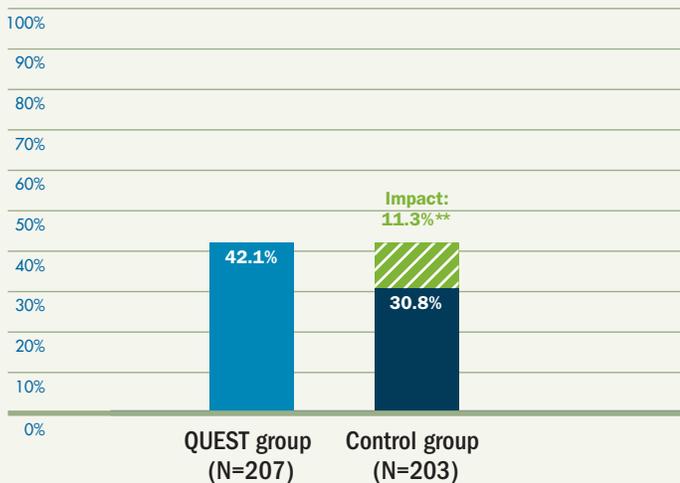
Figure 4 Percent of Study Participants Who Were Employed at Any Time during Each Year after Study Enrollment



A main tenet of Project QUEST's sectoral strategy is preparing individuals for well-paying careers while meeting the needs of employers in strong sectors of the local economy. Given the study's focus on health-care careers, we examined whether Project QUEST increased employment in this industry. About two-thirds

(67.8 percent) of QUEST participants worked in the health-care industry at any time during the eleven years after study enrollment, compared to 61.6 percent of control group members—a difference that was not statistically significant. However, QUEST participants were significantly more likely than control group members to be employed in the health-care industry in the eleventh year after study enrollment (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5 Percent of Study Participants Employed in the Health-Care Industry Eleven Years after Study Enrollment



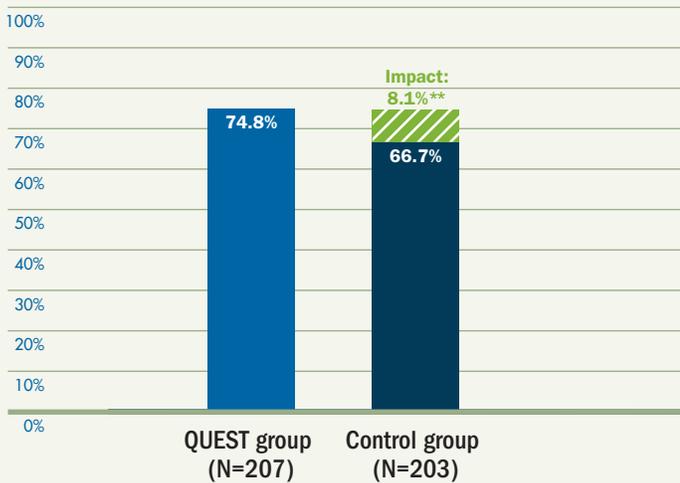
Statistical significance level: ** p<.05

All individuals in the study, including those in the control group, expressed interest in pursuing a health-care career at study enrollment. Therefore, it is not surprising that a substantial portion of participants in both groups ended up working in the industry. However, in the six-year follow-up survey, we found that QUEST participants were more likely than control group members to work in higher-skilled health-care positions, such as nursing and health technician jobs.

Project QUEST's Impacts on Postsecondary Education Attainment

Project QUEST seeks to increase San Antonio residents' earnings by helping them obtain postsecondary credentials valued in the local labor market. We examined the program's impact on college enrollment and completion using data from the NSC. While the NSC holds information for over 3,600 postsecondary institutions nationwide, schools have discretion regarding whether to report non-degree-seeking students, and the medical records coder program supported by Project QUEST during the study was not reported to the NSC. Therefore, the findings that follow underestimate Project QUEST's full impact on credential attainment because they do not include this information.

Figure 6 Percent of Study Participants Enrolled in NSC-Covered Postsecondary Education at Any Time during the Eleven Years after Study Enrollment



Statistical significance level: ** p < .05

We found that Project QUEST increased enrollment in NSC-covered college degree and certificate programs. QUEST participants were significantly more likely than control group members to be enrolled in college at any time during the eleven years after study enrollment—an 8.1 percentage point difference (Figure 6). Project QUEST had a significant, positive impact on college enrollment in the first three years after study enrollment, while college enrollment rates were similar for the two groups in years four through eleven. In the eleventh year after study enrollment, 13 percent of the QUEST group and 12 percent of control group members were enrolled in college.

QUEST participants were significantly more likely than control group members to earn NSC-covered credentials during the eleven years after study enrollment—a 13 percentage point difference (Figure 7). Project QUEST nearly doubled the percentage of participants who completed a college certificate or diploma program. Differences in completion of a college degree were not statistically significant.

As noted earlier, the study focused on Project QUEST's efforts to help individuals earn credentials and enter careers in the health-care field. As shown in Figure 8, QUEST participants were more than twice as likely as control group members to earn a college credential in the health-care field. The largest impact was on the percentage who completed a health-care certificate program, primarily licensed vocational nursing certificates. The program's full impact on earning health-care certificates is underestimated because the data do not include the medical records coder program. Project QUEST also had a significant, positive impact on the percentage who earned a college degree in the health-care field. Thirteen percent of QUEST participants earned an Associate, Bachelor's, and/or Master's degree in nursing, compared with eight percent of control group members.

Figure 7 Percent of Study Participants Who Earned NSC-Covered Postsecondary Credentials during the Eleven Years after Study Enrollment

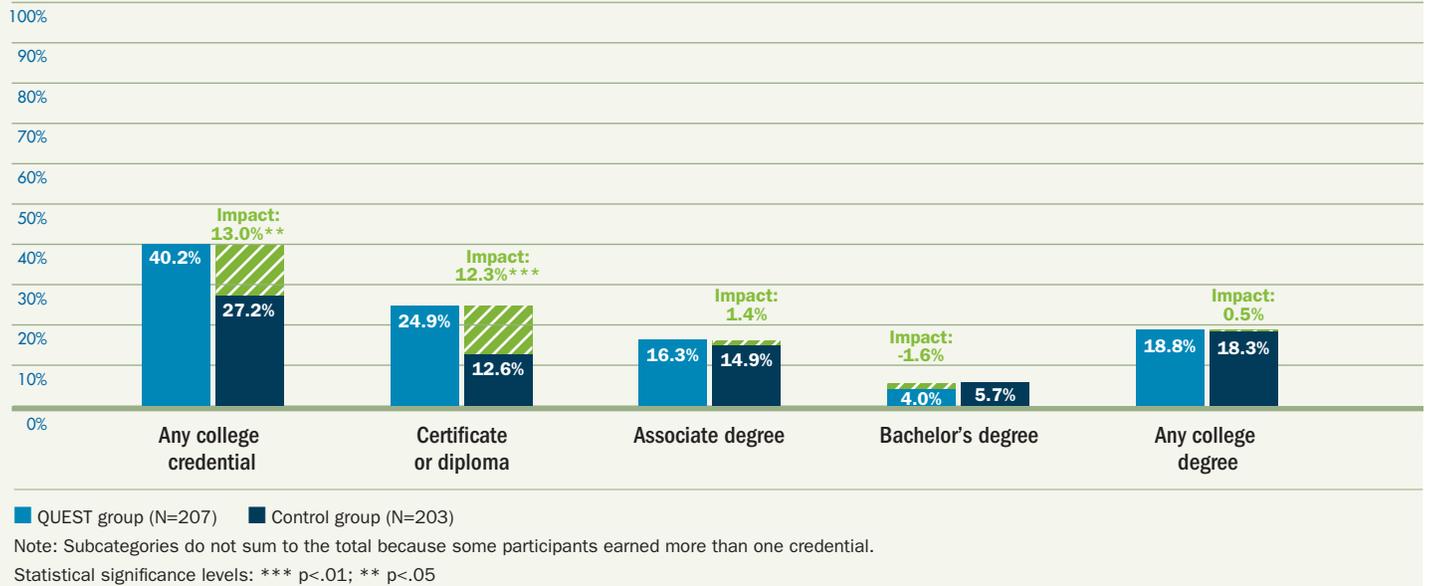
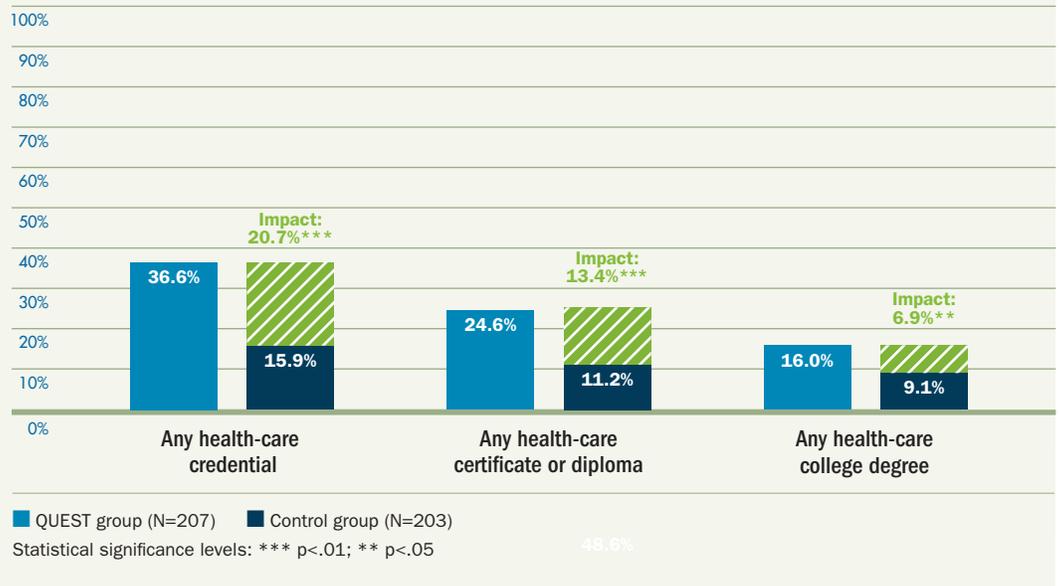


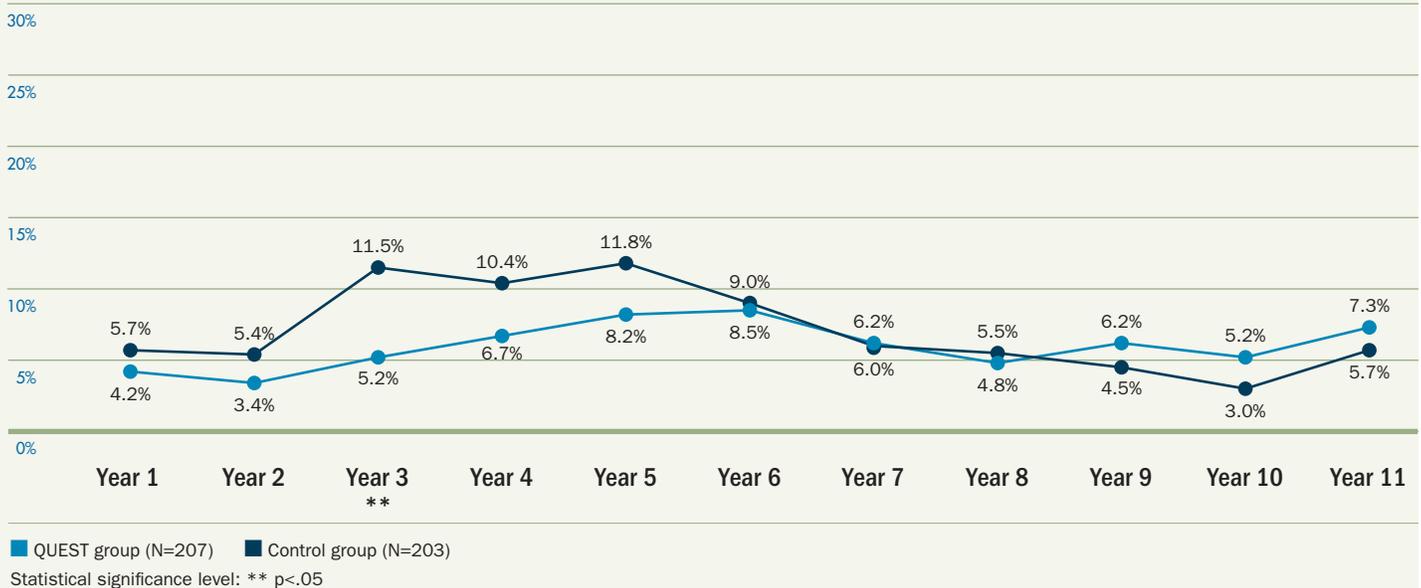
Figure 8 Percent of Study Participants Who Earned NSC-Covered Health-Care Credentials during the Eleven Years after Study Enrollment



Project QUEST's Impacts on Unemployment Benefits Receipt

QUEST participants were significantly less likely than control group members to receive unemployment benefits in the third year after study enrollment. Notably, the third year represents years 2009 to 2011, depending on when participants enrolled, and correlates with peak unemployment during and following the Great Recession. The differences between the groups in the percentages who received unemployment benefits faded over time, and the rates were similar in years six through eleven (Figure 9). The average benefit amount received over the eleven years, which includes those who received zero benefits, was \$748 for the QUEST group and \$976 for the control group; the \$228 difference was not statistically significant.

Figure 9 Percent of Study Participants Who Received Unemployment Benefits during Each Year after Study Enrollment



Project QUEST's Subgroup Impacts

We examined whether differences existed in Project QUEST's impacts for subgroups of participants, based on demographics, education, and family status. This analysis was exploratory since the study was not designed to ensure that sample sizes across subgroups would be large enough to detect effects of a policy-relevant size. The main findings from this analysis were that Project QUEST's impacts on employment and earnings were greatest for participants older than traditional college-age and for those previously unsuccessful in school.

Project QUEST had the largest impact on total earnings over the eleven years after study enrollment for the subgroup of participants ages 35 to 64. In this age group, QUEST participants earned, on average, about \$92,000 more than control group members over the eleven years (Figure 10). QUEST participants ages 35 to 64 at enrollment also were significantly more likely than their control group counterparts to be employed at any point in years nine through eleven after study enrollment (Figure 11). The declining control group employment rates found overall in years nine through eleven were driven by the decline among those ages 35 to 64, for whom the employment rate fell to 55.7 percent in year eleven. In contrast, employment rates for QUEST participants in this age group remained around 80 percent.

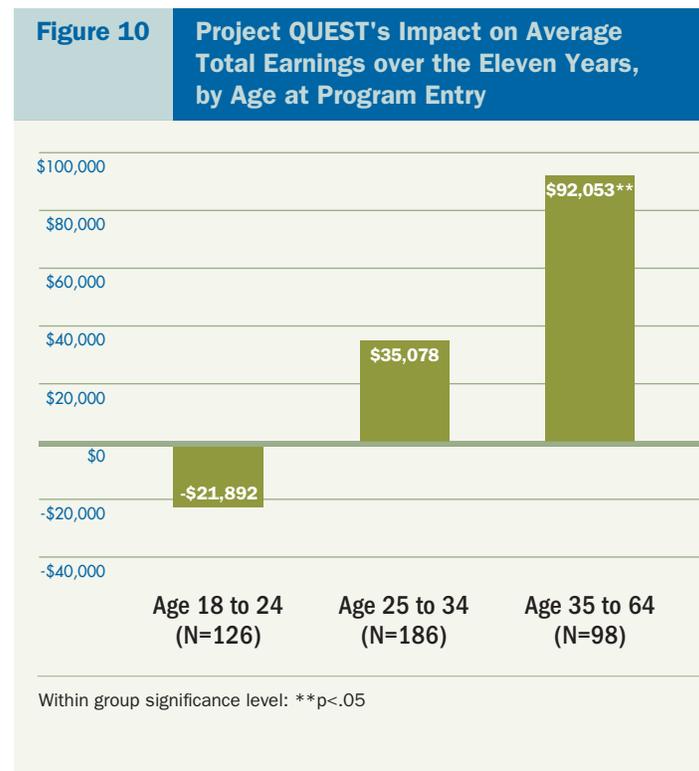
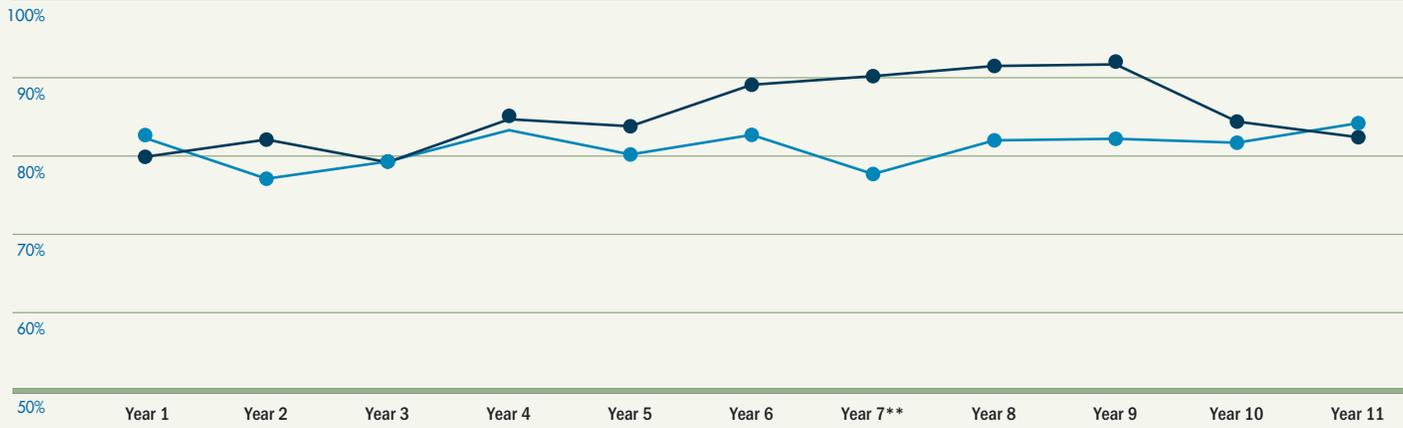
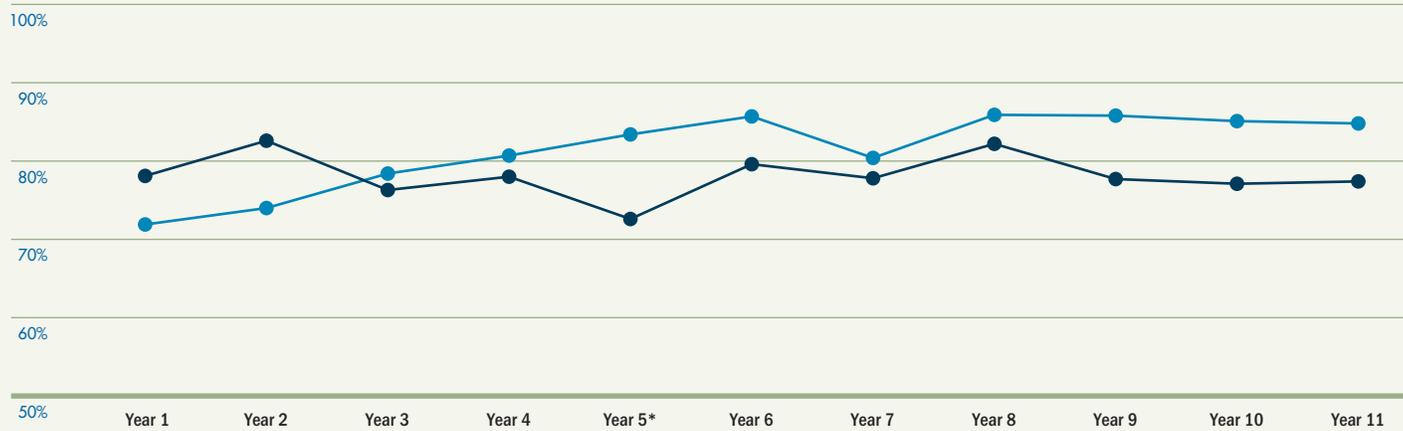


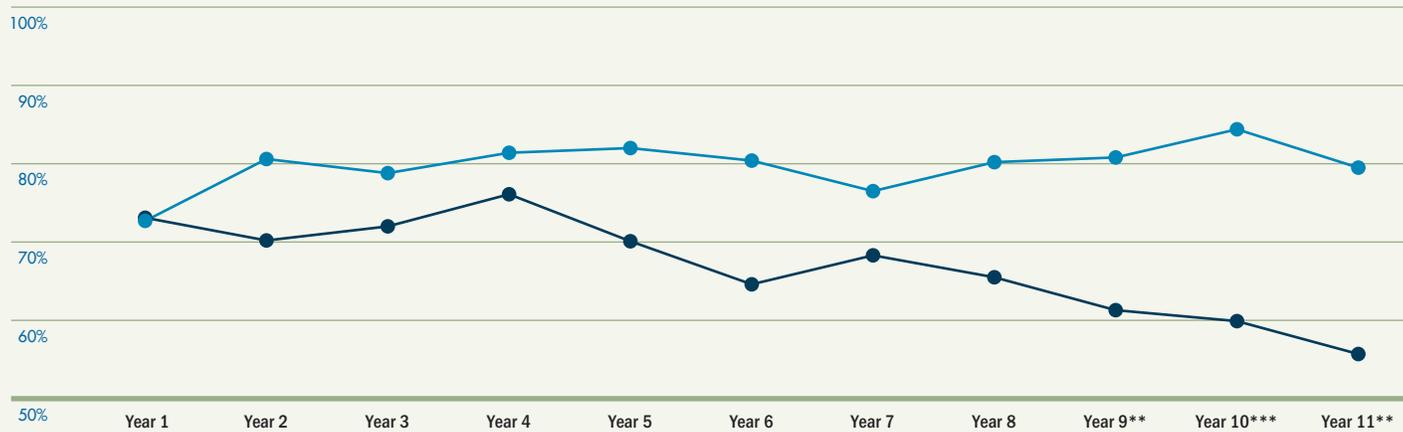
Figure 11 Percent Employed at Any Time in Each Year after Study Enrollment, by Age at Program Entry
Age 18 to 24



Age 25 to 34



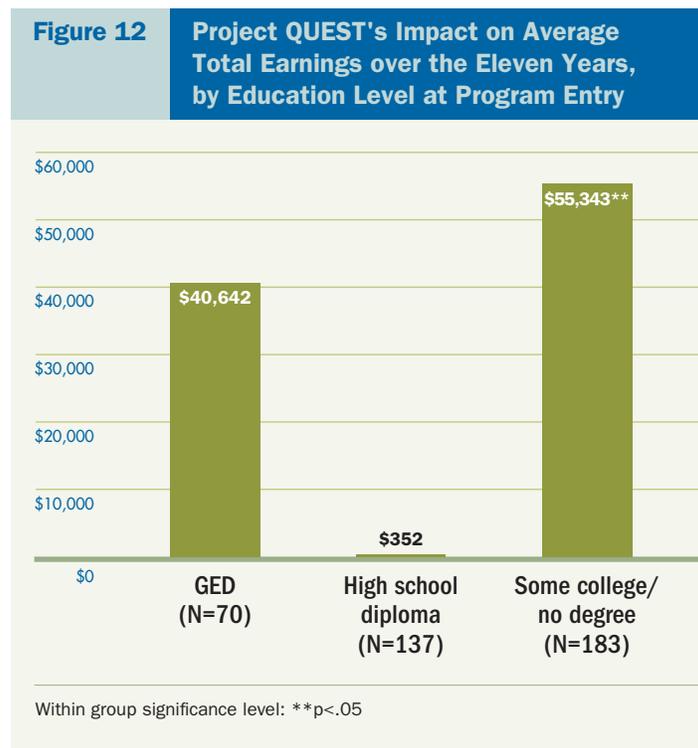
Age 35 to 64



■ QUEST group ■ Control group

Within group significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

We also found that Project QUEST's impacts on total earnings over the eleven years were greatest for those whose highest education level at program entry was some college/no degree and for GED holders (Figure 12). As shown in Figure 13, QUEST participants with some college experience but no degree at program entry were significantly more likely than their control group counterparts to be employed in years eight through eleven after study enrollment, and QUEST GED holders were significantly more likely than control group GED holders to be employed in years ten and eleven (Figure 13). The fact that GED holders appear to have benefited from Project QUEST is an important finding, as some researchers have questioned the value of investing in skills training programs for this group.⁶



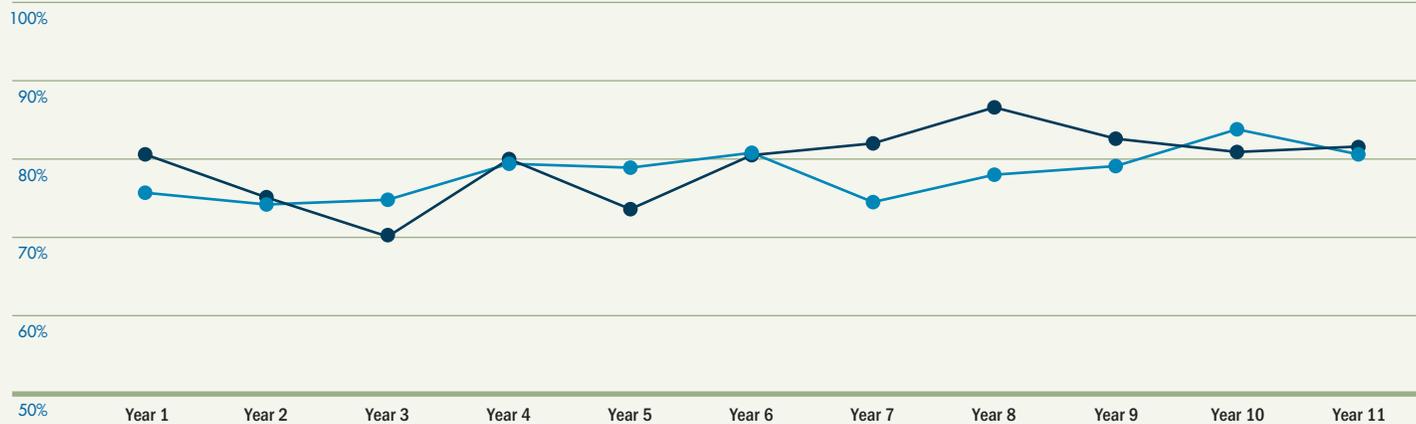
Additionally, we found that Project QUEST had positive impacts for women but not for men in the areas of credential attainment, employment in years ten and eleven, and total earnings over the eleven years after study enrollment (Figure 14). However, given the small number of men in the study, the differences between the groups were not statistically significant. Project QUEST's impacts on total earnings over the eleven years were large for both Latino and African American participants (Figure 15).

Figure 13 Percent Employed at Any Time in Each Year after Study Enrollment, by Education Level at Program Entry

GED



High School Diploma

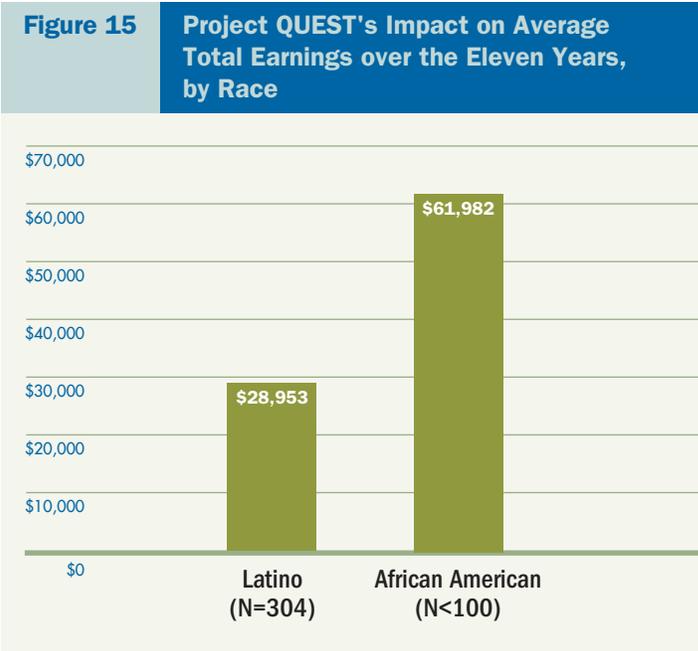
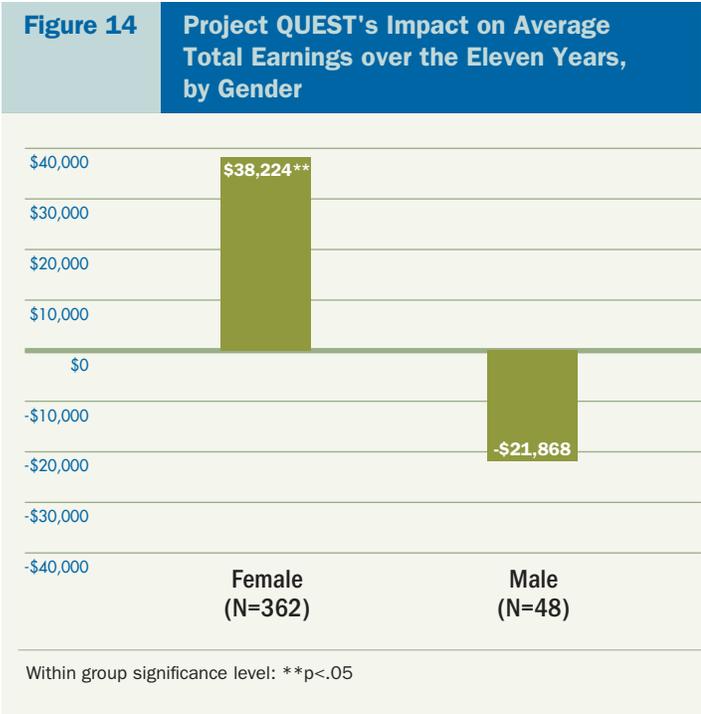


Some College/No Degree



■ QUEST group ■ Control group

Within group significance levels: ** p<.05; * p<.10



Outcomes for QUEST Graduates

The treatment group includes both Project QUEST participants who completed their health-care educational programs and those who did not. Overall, 66 percent of the 207 Project QUEST participants in the study completed their college training program, and 40 percent both completed training and earned the targeted health-care certification while receiving support from Project QUEST. Participants in the licensed vocational nursing and registered nursing programs, the fields in which Project QUEST had the most experience at the time of the study, were substantially more likely (53 percent) than participants in the medical records coding and technician programs (18 percent) to both complete their program and earn the targeted certification.

These Project QUEST “completers”—those who finished their college training program and earned a health-care certification while receiving support from Project QUEST—saw their average earnings quadruple over the eleven years after study enrollment, reaching nearly \$50,000 annually (Figure 16). In the eleventh year, 88 percent of completers were employed, and 66 percent of completers worked in the health-care industry.

Figure 16 Average Annual Earnings of the Project QUEST Completers during the Eleven Years after Study Enrollment (N=82)

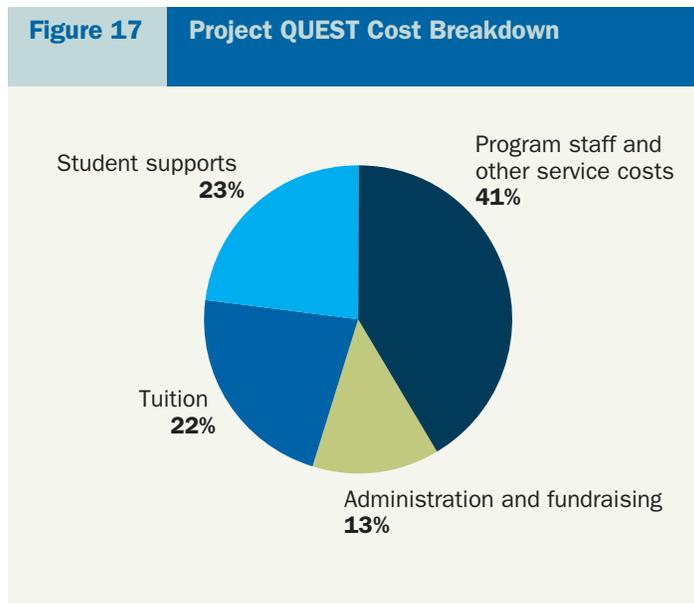
Note: Earnings are reported in constant 2019 dollars. Figures are for all QUEST completers, including those with zero earnings during each period.

Comparison of Benefits and Costs

Project QUEST makes a substantial investment in participants to help them complete postsecondary education and obtain well-paying jobs. To address the question of whether it is worthwhile from a societal perspective to invest in the Project QUEST model, we compared the program's net earnings benefits to its net costs, including both QUEST program costs and the costs of postsecondary education. For comparison purposes, we converted both benefits and costs to 2019 dollars—the final year in the analysis.

The average cost per participant of Project QUEST in 2019 dollars was \$12,464. **Figure 17** presents the cost breakdown. Tuition costs—that is, the portion of participants' community college tuition paid by Project QUEST—accounted for 22 percent of overall costs. The additional supports provided by Project QUEST, representing 23 percent of costs, included books, transportation, certification exam fees, review courses, uniforms, and vaccinations required to enter the health-care field. Salaries and benefits for program staff, including the career navigators who supported participants from college enrollment through job placement, and other direct program costs, accounted for 41 percent of QUEST's overall expenses.

We estimated college costs for QUEST participants and control group members using cost data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and



NSC enrollment data. Details about college cost calculations are included in the appendix. The total costs for QUEST participants include college costs plus the non-tuition costs of the Project QUEST program.

In the eleven years after study enrollment, Project QUEST's average net earnings benefits exceeded average net college and QUEST program costs by \$17,416 per participant. The net earnings benefit over the eleven years was \$31,395, while net program and college costs averaged \$13,979 (Table 2). In addition to the costs of the Project QUEST program, the QUEST group's average college costs were higher than those of the control group, due to QUEST participants' higher rates of college enrollment.

Table 2 Comparison of Average Net Earnings Benefits to Net Costs during the Eleven Years after Study Enrollment (2019 Dollars)

	QUEST group	Control group	Net
Benefits			
Average earnings	\$287,345	\$255,950	\$31,395
Costs			
Average college costs	\$17,036	\$12,726	\$4,310
Average Project QUEST costs (not including tuition)	\$9,669	\$0	\$9,669
Average total costs	\$26,705	\$12,726	\$13,979

The college cost numbers do not include QUEST participants who attended the medical records coder program. We estimate that including those participants' costs would increase the average college costs for the QUEST group by about \$800. Members of the control group also would have attended college programs not captured in the NSC data, but we do not have enrollment data for them that could be used to estimate those costs. Another factor to consider in this analysis is the increase in employee fringe benefits associated with the increase in earnings. While these benefits would be partially offset by an increase in work-related expenses, such as commuting and child care, we expect that Project QUEST's estimated net benefit would increase if these factors were included, using standard methods to estimate employee fringe benefits and work-related costs.

Workforce Development Funding in San Antonio

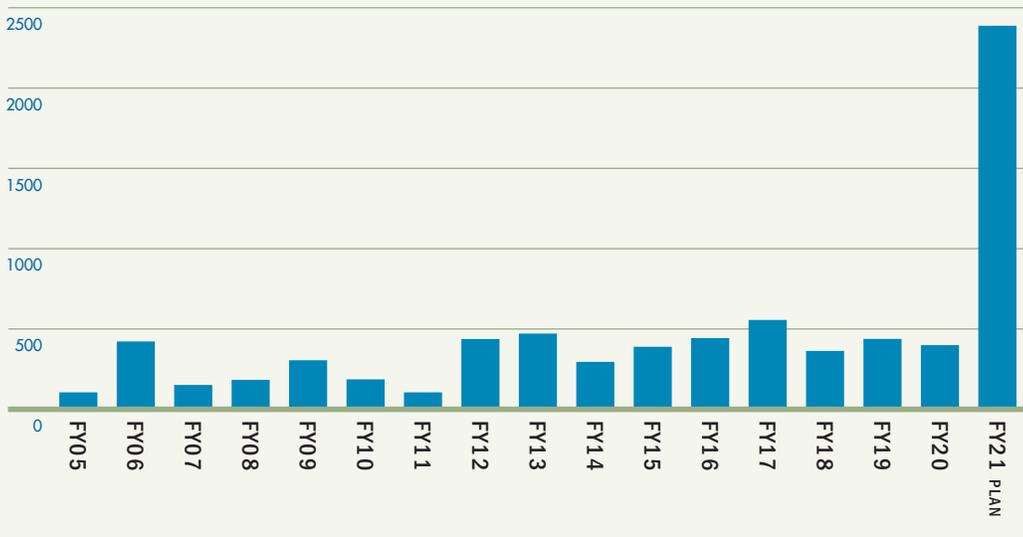
Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and Metro Alliance, the two Industrial Areas Foundation community organizations that created and have supported Project QUEST for over thirty years, have been instrumental in persuading local elected officials to substantially increase public investment in workforce development since the pandemic struck in March 2020. In June 2020, they advocated for the San Antonio Mayor and City Council to allocate \$75 million of the city's Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding to workforce training for 10,000 area residents who lost jobs during the pandemic. Of that, \$48 million was slated to help with grocery and rent expenses while residents were enrolled in training, and \$10 million was targeted to cover resulting child care needs.⁷

Also, in November 2020, San Antonio voters overwhelmingly approved Prop B, the city's SA Ready to Work training and education initiative, with 77 percent of the vote. Prop B increased the sales tax by one-eighth of a cent to generate \$40 million annually for four years—enough to train 10,000 job seekers a year for high-paying, in-demand jobs. COPS and Metro Alliance rewrote Prop B and held numerous voter outreach events in support of the initiative.⁸

As MIT economist Paul Osterman put it, “San Antonio, with its commitment to funding workforce development at scale via the local sales tax set-aside, is providing a national model for how a city can provide its citizens with real opportunities for good jobs. COPS/Metro have played central roles in building the political support for these initiatives and in helping shape the implementation of the programs.”

Although not exclusively devoted to supporting Project QUEST, these two initiatives will enable it to dramatically increase the number of individuals served, as shown in [Figure 18](#).

Figure 18 Number Newly Enrolled in Project QUEST, 2005 to 2021



Conclusion

The Project QUEST program includes both comprehensive supports to improve completion of postsecondary credentials and the development of partnerships with colleges, training providers, and employers to ensure graduates have the skills to meet the needs of employers in strong sectors of the local economy. The eleven-year results clearly establish that Project QUEST has continued to make a meaningful and lasting difference in people's lives. Project QUEST's impacts on attaining credentials continued to be large and significant, as did its earnings impacts. Project QUEST has achieved the longest sustained earnings impacts ever found in a U.S. workforce development program. The program's net earnings benefits alone substantially outweighed its costs, even after taking the costs of college into account.

The QUEST findings underscore the following key points.

- QUEST was particularly important to participants ages 25 and older at study enrollment. It made its largest impact on those 35 and older at study enrollment—who earned over \$92,000 more than control group members during the eleven-year study. These remarkable results demonstrate the potential value of workforce development organizations investing in older workers.
- The eleven-year results reveal that older QUEST participants were much more likely than older control group members to remain in the labor market, with about 80 percent working each year. In contrast, older control group members rapidly left the labor market—just under 56 percent worked at any point in the eleventh year after enrollment.
- Eleven years after study enrollment, QUEST graduates on average earned about \$50,000 annually, quadruple their earnings when they enrolled. For them, QUEST has provided a path out of poverty directly into the middle class. (By way of comparison, a salary of \$50,000 in San Antonio is equivalent to about \$86,000 in Washington, DC).⁹
- The results also highlight the barriers adults with low incomes face to gaining postsecondary credentials that can help them access better paying jobs. While QUEST had a large, positive impact on obtaining college credentials, after eleven years, 40 percent of QUEST participants and 27 percent of control group members had earned a college certificate or degree.
- Project QUEST increased attainment of health-care credentials and employment in the health-care industry. Our analysis supports the conclusion that Project QUEST's impacts on earnings were driven by its impacts on attaining health-care credentials.

Thanks to the ongoing organizing and advocacy by COPS and Metro Alliance, San Antonio is substantially increasing its investment in skills training, which will enable Project QUEST to scale its services dramatically in coming years.

Endnotes

- 1 During the first three years of the study, which covered the period when all study participants enrolled and at least their first year in the program, QUEST paid 100 percent of participants' tuition. After this time, QUEST reduced payments to 50 percent of participants' tuition, but it continued to cover 100 percent of fees, as well as the costs of books and other education-related expenses.
- 2 Project QUEST was initially part of a study we launched at Public/Private Ventures focusing on sector-based training programs operated by Per Scholas, Jewish Vocational Service Boston, and the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership. Each of these organizations demonstrated large, statistically significant earnings impacts.
- 3 For program impact reports, see Elliott, Mark and Anne Roder, *Escalating Gains: Project QUEST's Sectoral Strategy Pays Off*, New York, NY: Economic Mobility Corporation, April 2017. <https://economicmobilitycorp.org/escalating-gains-project-quests-sectoral-strategy-pays-off/>; Roder, Anne and Mark Elliott, *Nine Year Gains: Project QUEST's Continuing Impact*, New York, NY: Economic Mobility Corporation, April 2019. <https://economicmobilitycorp.org/nine-year-gains-project-quests-continuing-impact/>; and *Nine Year Education Gains: Project QUEST's Impact on Student Success*, New York, NY: Economic Mobility Corporation, June 2020. <https://economicmobilitycorp.org/nine-year-education-gains/> For further details on the program model and participants, see *Escalating Gains: The Elements of Project QUEST's Success*. New York, NY: Economic Mobility Corporation, May 2018. <https://economicmobilitycorp.org/escalating-gains-elements-project-quests-success/>
- 4 The difference in earnings over the eleven years is statistically significant with a p-value of .067.
- 5 Although the year eleven earnings impact is larger than the impacts in years four and five, the level of statistical significance is less due to the increasing variation in earnings. The greater variation resulted from not only increases in earnings on the higher end for both groups but also the increasing number of control group members who did not work at all and had zero earnings.
- 6 See Clement, Douglas, Interview with James Heckman. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, June 1, 2005. <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2005/interview-with-james-heckman>.
- 7 <https://www.governing.com/finance/San-Antonio-Approves-191-Million-for-Coronavirus-Relief.html>
- 8 <https://www.tpr.org/san-antonio/2020-11-04/san-antonio-voters-approve-sales-tax-for-workforce-development-and-transportation>
- 9 <https://money.cnn.com/calculator/pf/cost-of-living/index.html>

Appendix

Study Design and Final Sample

The evaluation of Project QUEST uses a randomized controlled trial design to assess its impacts on individuals' outcomes. To evaluate program impacts, this report relies on data from a baseline survey conducted at the time of study enrollment, administrative data on earnings and unemployment benefits receipt from the Texas Workforce Commission for the two years before and eleven years after study enrollment, and National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data on postsecondary enrollment and completion during the eleven years after study enrollment. We used data from the baseline survey to examine the characteristics of treatment and control group members in the final sample and to control for any differences in characteristics between the groups in the analysis of program impacts. We also analyzed data from Project QUEST on study participants' anticipated health-care program tracks, program outcomes for members of the treatment group, and program costs.

QUEST staff completed the program's intake and screening process to identify eligible candidates and obtained their written consent to take part in the study. Staff then sent their contact information to a survey firm, the Institute for Survey Research (ISR) at Temple University, which completed the baseline survey and conducted random assignment. Individuals were blocked according to their intended program track (i.e., registered nursing, licensed vocational nursing, medical records coding, and the various technician tracks), and ISR randomly assigned 50 percent of study participants to the treatment group and 50 percent to the control group within these blocks. Between April 2006 and October 2008, 410 individuals enrolled in the study, of whom 207 were randomly assigned to the treatment group and 203 to the control group. QUEST staff invited those assigned to the treatment group to participate in the program and told those

assigned to the control group that they would not be receiving QUEST services but could independently enroll in college or training or seek other services.

Table A1 presents the baseline characteristics of the full sample of treatment and control group members. There were no significant differences between the groups in key characteristics, including gender, age, highest degree earned, annual earnings, housing status, marital status, and having any children under age 18. Treatment group members were somewhat less likely than control group members to be Latino and more likely than control group members to have a valid driver's license and live in public or subsidized housing. These differences are most likely due to chance, given the number of characteristics tested.

Table A1 Comparison of the Baseline Characteristics of Treatment and Control Group Members in the Project QUEST Randomized Controlled Trial

	Treatment group (N=207)	Control group (N=203)	p-value
Gender			.705
Female	88.9%	87.7%	
Male	11.1%	12.3%	
Age			.633
18 to 24	29.5%	32.0%	
25 to 34	46.4%	44.3%	
35 to 44	15.5%	17.7%	
45 to 64	8.7%	5.9%	
Race/Ethnicity			.058
Latino	69.1%	79.3%	
Black	16.9%	10.8%	
White	12.1%	6.9%	
Other	1.9%	3.0%	
US immigrant	9.7%	5.4%	.164
Highest degree earned			.278
GED	24.6%	25.6%	
High school diploma	69.1%	71.4%	
College degree (associate or bachelor's)	6.3%	3.0%	
Had prior health-care certificates or licenses			.525
Yes	30.4%	27.6%	
No	69.6%	72.4%	
Housing status			.128
Own	18.4%	14.3%	
Rent	63.3%	58.6%	
Live rent-free	17.4%	26.6%	
Homeless	1.0%	0.5%	
Living in public or subsidized housing			.061
Yes	15.5%	9.4%	
No	84.5%	90.6%	
Had a valid driver's license	92.3%	86.2%	.047
Self-rated health status			.162
Excellent	48.3%	57.6%	
Good	44.0%	35.5%	
Fair or poor	7.7%	6.9%	
Marital status			.412
Currently married	30.4%	24.6%	
Formerly married	25.1%	28.1%	
Never married	44.4%	47.3%	
Had any children under age 18 in household			.407
Yes	67.2%	70.9%	
No	32.8%	29.1%	
Average annual earnings in the two years prior to enrollment based on state administrative data (including zero earnings)	\$21,976	\$20,116	.292

Targeted Health-Care Career Tracks

Table A2 provides information about the program length and course requirements for completing each of the health-care career tracks supported by Project QUEST during the study and the type of credential conferred.

Table A2 Program Requirements and Credentials Earned for Project QUEST's Targeted Health-Care Career Tracks			
Track	Number of study participants	Program length and course requirements	Credential
Medical records coder	101	7-month program	Continuing education certificate of completion
Licensed vocational nurse	243	1-year program with 3 prerequisite classes	Certificate Level 2/II
Registered nurse	30	2-year program with 7 prerequisite classes	Associate of Applied Science
Radiography, respiratory therapy, and sonography technicians	26	2-year programs with 3 prerequisite classes	Associate of Applied Science
Surgical technician	10	1-year program with 6 prerequisite classes	Associate of Applied Science

Analysis

The study uses an intent-to-treat analysis framework to assess program impacts; that is, we examined differences in the outcomes of all participants randomly assigned to the Project QUEST and control groups. We estimated impacts using multivariate regression analysis, and we report regression-adjusted results. The regression models included the baseline explanatory variables in **Table A1** to control for any differences between the treatment and control group members. The models also included a binary variable for being a treatment group member and an index variable indicating study participants' intended health-care program track. **Tables A3** and **A4** provide the impact estimates with standard errors and p-values.

Table A3 Employment and Earnings Regression-Adjusted Impact Estimates with Standard Errors and P-values

	Impact	Std. Err.	p-value
Average annual earnings in each year after study enrollment (in constant 2019 dollars)			
Year 1	-\$2,905***	\$962	0.003
Year 2	-\$2,866**	\$1,238	0.021
Year 3	\$2,017	\$1,697	0.235
Year 4	\$4,420**	\$1,900	0.021
Year 5	\$4,089*	\$2,078	0.050
Year 6	\$5,754***	\$2,132	0.007
Year 7	\$2,635	\$2,259	0.244
Year 8	\$2,774	\$2,293	0.227
Year 9	\$5,726**	\$2,413	0.018
Year 10	\$5,134**	\$2,580	0.047
Year 11	\$4,616*	\$2,718	0.090
Average total earnings over the 11 years after study enrollment	\$31,395*	\$17,112	0.067
Percent employed at any time during each year after study enrollment			
Year 1	-2.4%	3.5%	0.489
Year 2	-2.8%	3.8%	0.469
Year 3	3.2%	3.9%	0.425
Year 4	2.3%	3.8%	0.541
Year 5	6.6%*	3.9%	0.090
Year 6	3.5%	3.6%	0.339
Year 7	-1.1%	3.8%	0.782
Year 8	1.9%	3.6%	0.607
Year 9	5.3%	3.7%	0.148
Year 10	9.2%**	3.8%	0.017
Year 11	10.1%**	3.9%	0.011
Percent employed in the health-care industry in year 11 after study enrollment	11.3%**	4.5%	0.014

Table A4 Postsecondary Education and Unemployment Benefits Regression-Adjusted Impact Estimates with Standard Errors and P-values

	Impact	Std. Err.	p-value
Percent who enrolled in NSC-covered postsecondary education at any time during the 11 years after study enrollment	8.1%**	3.9%	0.041
Percent who earned NSC-covered postsecondary credentials during the 11 years after study enrollment			
Any credential	13.0%***	4.4%	0.003
Certificate or diploma	12.3%***	3.8%	0.002
Associate degree	1.4%	3.5%	0.695
Bachelor's degree	-1.6%	2.1%	0.456
Any college degree	0.5%	3.6%	0.893
Percent who earned NSC-covered health-care credentials during the 11 years after study enrollment			
Any health-care credential	20.7%***	4.1%	0.000
Any health-care certificate or diploma	13.4%***	3.7%	0.000
Any health-care college degree	6.9%**	3.2%	0.037
Percent who received unemployment benefits during each year after study enrollment			
Year 1	-1.5%	2.1%	0.467
Year 2	-1.9%	2.0%	0.347
Year 3	-6.2%**	2.7%	0.025
Year 4	-3.8%	2.7%	0.175
Year 5	-3.6%	2.9%	0.225
Year 6	-0.5%	2.8%	0.852
Year 7	0.2%	2.4%	0.931
Year 8	-0.7%	2.2%	0.759
Year 9	1.8%	2.2%	0.428
Year 10	2.2%	2.0%	0.270
Year 11	1.6%	2.6%	0.534

Calculation of College Costs

We estimated college costs using cost data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics as well as enrollment data from NSC. Total college expenses are the core expenses reported to IPEDS for each year of the study. Core expenses for public institutions include instruction, research, public service, academic support, student services, institutional support, operation and maintenance of plant, depreciation, scholarships and fellowships, interest, and other operating and nonoperating expenses. Core expenses for private, not-for-profit and for-profit institutions include instruction, research, public service, academic support, student services, institutional support, net grant aid to students, and other expenses. For all institutions, core expenses exclude expenses for auxiliary enterprises (e.g., bookstores, dormitories), hospitals, and independent operations.

We divided total expenses by the 12-month FTE enrollment for each year to produce annual expense per FTE amounts for each school and project year. For the four Alamo District Schools in the data, due to a change in reporting that affected the FTE calculation during this period, we divided total expenses by the total number of credit hours and multiplied the per-credit rate by 30 to produce the annual expense per FTE estimates. We then adjusted the annual expense amounts for inflation, expressed as 2019 dollars.

We used the annual expense per FTE amounts to calculate the total college costs for each participant over the eleven years after random assignment using the NSC enrollment data. The annual expense per FTE amounts were discounted if a participant was only in school for part of the year and/or was enrolled less than full-time (i.e., if the NSC data indicated the student was enrolled three-quarter-time, we used 75 percent of the annual expense per FTE; if half-time, we used 50 percent; if less than half-time, we used 25 percent).



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