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Youth Employment And Training Programs: A Review And A Reply

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Youth Employment and Training Programs: A Review and a Reply
Youth Employment and Training Programs: The YEDPA Years. by Committee on Youth
Employment Programs of the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education of
the National Research Council

Review by: Robinson G. Hollister, Jr.

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Reply by Robinson G. Hollister, Jr.

The other men were easy to talk to, but they didn't know anything. If one stopped to think about it, it was depressing how little most men learned in their lifetimes. Pea Eye was a prime example. Though loyal and able and brave, Pea had never displayed the slightest ability to learn from his experience, though his experience was considerable. Time and again he would walk up on the wrong side of a horse that was known to kick, and then look surprised when he got kicked.

L. McMurtry, *Lonesome Dave*

A central concern of our committee, or at least a concern of mine, was that, for the most part, like Pea Eye, we in the United States had, in the past, not taken advantage of our experience with governmental employment and training programs in order to learn, in a systematic way, about what programs work for various groups in the population, including the youth population. With the massive federal initiative on youth employment embodied in YEDPA, had we once again failed to learn from experience and been surprised at the resultant "kick," or was it different this time?

There was some reason to hope, at the outset of our work, that YEDPA would prove the exception to the past habit of learning little from experience. The legislation had explicitly set as a major purpose "establishment of pilot, demonstration and experimental programs to test the efficacy of different ways of dealing with the problem of youth unemployment" and created authority and money for the Secretary of Labor to conduct research, demonstration, and evaluation activities concerning youth employment problems. Further, pursuant to that authority, the Department of Labor's Office of Youth Programs took the unprecedented step of trying to lay out specifically the research and evaluation questions they hoped would be answered and titled this a "Knowledge Development Plan."

Thus, it seemed sensible for a National Academy of Science Committee to undertake to respond to the charge put to it: (1) to review what is known about the

effectiveness of the principal types of YEDPA programs; (2) to assess existing knowledge regarding the implementation of Youth Employment Programs; (3) to evaluate the YEDPA research strategy; and (4) to summarize the lessons learned from YEDPA for future policy development and program implementation.

The results of the committee's work in response to that charge are summarized in the volume that is under review. We apologize for the length of the volume; we decided that if we were going to present summary judgments it was best to follow our high school teachers' admonishments to "show all your work," or at least enough so that readers could see the foundations upon which those summary judgments were built.¹

We are grateful to Professor Briggs for a careful reading of our report, particularly in light of its considerable length. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Professor Briggs for his several favorable comments on the report. At the same time, I would naturally like to correct what I consider misreadings and oversights.

¹ In his review (p. 7), Professor Briggs takes issue with the way we present results of the job entitlement program for low-income youths. It is useful, I think, to note that he is able to do so because we were so explicit as to what the results were and how we came to our conclusions about them: findings of negative urban effects of the program were balanced against positive rural effects. One can differ over the presentation of the findings—and there were such differences within the committee—but the important point, not to be missed, is that we provided readers with the means to reevaluate our conclusions on their own.

Professor Briggs argues that there are those primarily interested in “meeting needs” and those “largely concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of these ventures.”² This division seems to us false and misleading—there are many people with both concerns—but, setting this dispute aside, there is also at base the issue of how one is “meeting needs” if it turns out that a given program is shown to be largely ineffective in changing the life chances of the program participants.

Professor Briggs argues that “the credo is developing that the design of the program must be such that it facilitates the evaluation process.” We argued, instead, that the design of *some* programs *can* facilitate the evaluation process so that we can learn from experience. Briggs argues that the report suggests that “the tail should wag the dog,” but he would be hard pressed to identify language of the report that makes such a suggestion. Our lament is that programs and evaluations seemed to have been run in such a way that we can make out neither a dog nor a tail but, for the most part, only an indecipherable array of body parts. Indeed, the report argues that attempting to do *less* evaluation research, in the sense of trying to evaluate a smaller number of program types, but doing the evaluations in a sound fashion would have contributed more knowledge than did the broad, ambitious sweep of the YEDPA demonstration and research efforts.

In his polemic against evaluation of

² It is interesting that a little further on in his review Professor Briggs, in discussing the research and demonstration efforts made in the YEDPA legislation, states: “Over \$500 million were earmarked for this massive research undertaking.” Focusing on that figure illustrates again a confusion about conflicts between evaluation research and “meeting needs.” As we note in our report (p. 78), 85% of the \$500 million designated for demonstration and research went for the delivery of services, which fits, we presume, the “meeting needs” category; just 15% of the resources went directly for research costs. The presumption that doing evaluation research on program effectiveness means that “needs” of the target population will not be met because resources are being sucked up by researchers is simply not correct.

programs, Briggs notes that most industrialized nations have “been content to initiate labor market interventions and be satisfied in the intuitive belief that what seems logical to do must be so,” implying that this is the best way to proceed in governmental labor market interventions. This description is certainly a fair representation of what European nations have done: these countries generate virtually no serious evaluations of employment and training program effectiveness.

In the American experience we have found that Professor Briggs’s suggestion that “what seems logical to do must be so” is not always a sensible prescription. Consider, for example, government education policies. For many years “school men” have been telling us that the best way to improve educational performance is to increase expenditures per pupil, reduce the size of classes, and pay more to teachers who attain higher degrees. It was a case of “what seems logical to do must be so.” But the analysis begun in the 1960s has shown that these simple logical relationships do not hold up, and that effective government intervention to improve educational performance is far more difficult and complex than had been supposed by the simple prescriptions of the “school men.”³

Similarly, it seemed sensible to help family farmers by providing price supports for the commodities they sell, but after decades of such supports, careful analysis showed that the benefits from these policies flowed not to the small family farmer but to the large corporate farming sector.⁴

In both of these cases the prescriptions seemed logical and people believed these programs were “meeting needs” in the society, but careful analysis told a different story.

³ See E. Hanushek, “The Economics of Schooling,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, Sept. 1986, for a review of many of the studies yielding these findings.

⁴ See J. D. Johnson and S. D. Short, “Commodity Programs: Who Has Received the Benefits?” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Dec. 1983 for a review of studies of the distributional impact of farm support programs.

Despite Professor Briggs's implication that the thrust for evaluation in this report serves to undercut youth programs by encouraging "the opponents of direct public policy interventions, who are sure to interpret it [this report] to be a warning against future actions," it can be argued that continued strong evaluations have played an important role in sustaining a significant employment program. Ever since its inception in the 1960s, the Job Corps has continuously been under attack as a very expensive training program for disadvantaged youth. ("We could send a kid to Harvard for that amount.") Each Congress has had to deal with attempts of various parties to terminate this program, but these efforts have been regularly turned back in part because supporters of the Job Corps were able to point to well-substantiated findings from evaluation efforts that indicated that the social benefits from the program considerably outweighed the costs.

The focus of our report on effectiveness findings and on research derives clearly from points 1 and 3 of the charge to our committee (quoted at the outset of this reply). We focused on effectiveness because that was the principal charge to this committee. The criteria for selection of the reports seemed to us to reflect reasonable standards to apply if one were going to come to conclusions about program effectiveness. The fact that applying these reasonable standards reduced the number of usable studies from over 400 to just under 30 was as shocking to our committee as it would be to any reasonable observer. It should be emphasized that we were not arbitrarily posing questions about the effectiveness of YEDPA standards that were sharply at variance with those enunciated by the program administrators themselves. In their "youth knowledge development plan" the National Office of Youth Programs explicitly proposed to answer a series of major questions about the effectiveness of the youth programs; thus, in focusing on the effectiveness aspects of the report on YEDPA, the committee was largely following the path set by the program administrators them-

selves. We did have to set standards for what constituted reasonable evidence bearing on those questions, but we find it hard to believe that those standards would be judged unreasonable by the social science community.

Briggs notes that the report warns readers "not to confuse the conclusion about the failure of research to provide adequate evidence with the conclusion that a particular program itself was ineffective or failed in some manner." Indeed, this warning was put at the very beginning of the report and underlined and repeated later in the report. He argues that this point is too subtle for most readers and refers to the *New York Times* article on the program as evidence that such a warning is not sufficient. Of course it is always risky to try to get across a somewhat complex message, but I really wonder what alternative path Professor Briggs would have had us take. Three possibilities come to mind: don't put such a warning into the text; don't report that there was little evidence on program effectiveness; make up some plausible stories to suggest that specific programs were successful, or were failures, even though there was little reliable evidence bearing upon either success or failure. It is hard to believe that Professor Briggs would endorse any of these alternatives (and, of course, our committee never seriously considered any of them), yet that is what he appears to do by implication.

In the concluding section of his review Professor Briggs emphasizes the importance of institutional issues and argues that our committee dismissed them. The institutional factors operate at two levels: first, there are those that operate generally in the labor market and educational system, and, second, there are those that can affect the implementation and effectiveness of employment and training programs per se. The committee struggled with both of these sets of institutional factors in its discussions and, in the process, became keenly aware of its own inability to generate satisfactory commentaries on the state of knowledge regarding such factors. We sought to remedy our

self-perceived deficiencies in this regard by commissioning papers by others whom we hoped might better address these types of concerns. Aspects of these papers were incorporated both directly into the text and, in some cases, into appendix papers published with the report.

Professor Briggs laments that “there were reports written for YEDPA that did discuss these institutional issues, but because of the panel’s selection criteria those reports were ignored. Likewise, the extensive discussions in this book of the credentialing effect of education, the prevalence of discrimination in the labor market, and the issue of ‘stigmatizing’ participants in employment training programs are not likely to receive the research priority they deserve.”

I respond to this contention in two parts. First, the claim that our selection criteria led us to ignore the reports discussing the institutional issues is simply not correct. The selection criteria had to do with the analysis for effectiveness (the content of Chapters 4–8). Beyond the analysis for effectiveness findings, *all* of the reports were also screened to pick out the discussions of implementation, the institutional issues. A paper was commissioned in which we asked the author to use these reports and other sources as the raw material to try to draw together what could be learned about the problems of implementation and the strengths and weaknesses of various methods of dealing with those problems. Further, two other authors were commissioned to write papers on implementation issues. One of these authors, who had continuing experience at the local level in the operation of employment and training programs, was asked to try to present “the lessons from experience” with the YEDPA and similar programs. The second, Richard Elmore, was asked to review in detail the background to the development of YEDPA and the decision-making processes at the federal level that shaped the program. That paper is reproduced in its entirety as a commissioned paper in the report.

We distilled the major elements of these four sources—the reports themselves and

the three commissioned papers dealing with implementation—and presented the result as Chapter 3 of the report, “Implementation of the Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act.” It is curious that in his emphasis on the importance of institutional issues, Briggs fails to mention a major chapter that was explicitly directed to the problems of implementation of YEDPA programs.⁵

With respect to the second part of Professor Briggs’s lament—about discrimination, stigmatization, and so on—I would note that we point to the possibilities of discrimination as a factor in youth employment problems (pp. 55–56, 63); we comment on the potential importance of the social context (pp. 64, 65) and include in the report a commissioned paper by Elijah Anderson on this issue (pp. 348–66); we emphasize, as the concluding major point of our “Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations,” the dilemma created by the fact that making employment and training more “target efficient” by focusing them on the disadvantaged population may cause these programs to be both “stigmatized” themselves (a “program for losers”) and a cause of “stigma” for the participants (pp. 24, 33). Finally, in one of our major recommendations, we state: “The role of the school system and the relation between the schools and the youth employment and training system are critical in resolving this problem [of targeting without stigmatizing]. The committee therefore recommends a direct study of the appropriate role of the youth employment and training system and its relation to the educational system.” This major recommendation is surely a call for more institutional research, but Professor Briggs simply dismisses it as “hollow.” What are we to do?

Professor Briggs censures us for being “timid and cautious.” I would argue that

⁵ Professor Briggs could not have known from reading the text about all this detail concerning commissioned papers, but that does not excuse his omitting mention of the chapter on implementation and of other indications that we took the institutional context of employment and training programs very seriously.

we were not cautious but, rather, truthful. We reported the state of knowledge about program effectiveness as we found it. Professor Briggs may not like what we found, but he does not mention *any* study or finding that we missed or ignored that was at variance with our findings or conclusions. We thought we could detect some of the reasons why more is not known about “what works for whom” and, better yet, we laid out some relatively simple methodological guide-

⁶ These guidelines (outlined on pp. 30–32) are: randomly assign subjects to participation in the program and to a control group; have a reasonably large sample of participants and controls; and take vigorous steps to maintain contact with both participants and controls over a long enough period following the program length—2–3 years—to determine whether the effects of the program become evident only with time and whether they endure or fade out. If these steps are taken, elaborate econometric techniques are not needed to estimate the impact of the program; quite the contrary, following successful implementation of these procedures the simplest comparison of the experience of participants and controls yields reliable estimates of the effects of the program. These guidelines are not only straightforward, but they have in fact been successfully followed in several major studies of employment and training programs. They are not econometric esoterica, as implied in Professor Briggs’s review, but sensible procedures for evaluating program effects.

lines (based not on hypotheses but on examples of actually executed evaluations)⁶ so that in the future more will be learned from program experience and research efforts.

For twenty years employment and training policy formulation has been guided largely by the impressions and intuitions of well-meaning people (including many of us on the committee) about the character of employment problems of the disadvantaged and what would work to solve them. But good intentions are not enough. I argue that we have plenty of evidence that impressions and intuitions can go wrong, that the “needs” of the disadvantaged are hardly “served” by the continuation of ineffective programs, and that we *can* learn from experience in order to redirect those resources in ways that will better serve this population in the future. I hope that our report, and Professor Briggs’s provocative review of it, stimulate those concerned with youth employment problems and programs to consider seriously this argument.

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