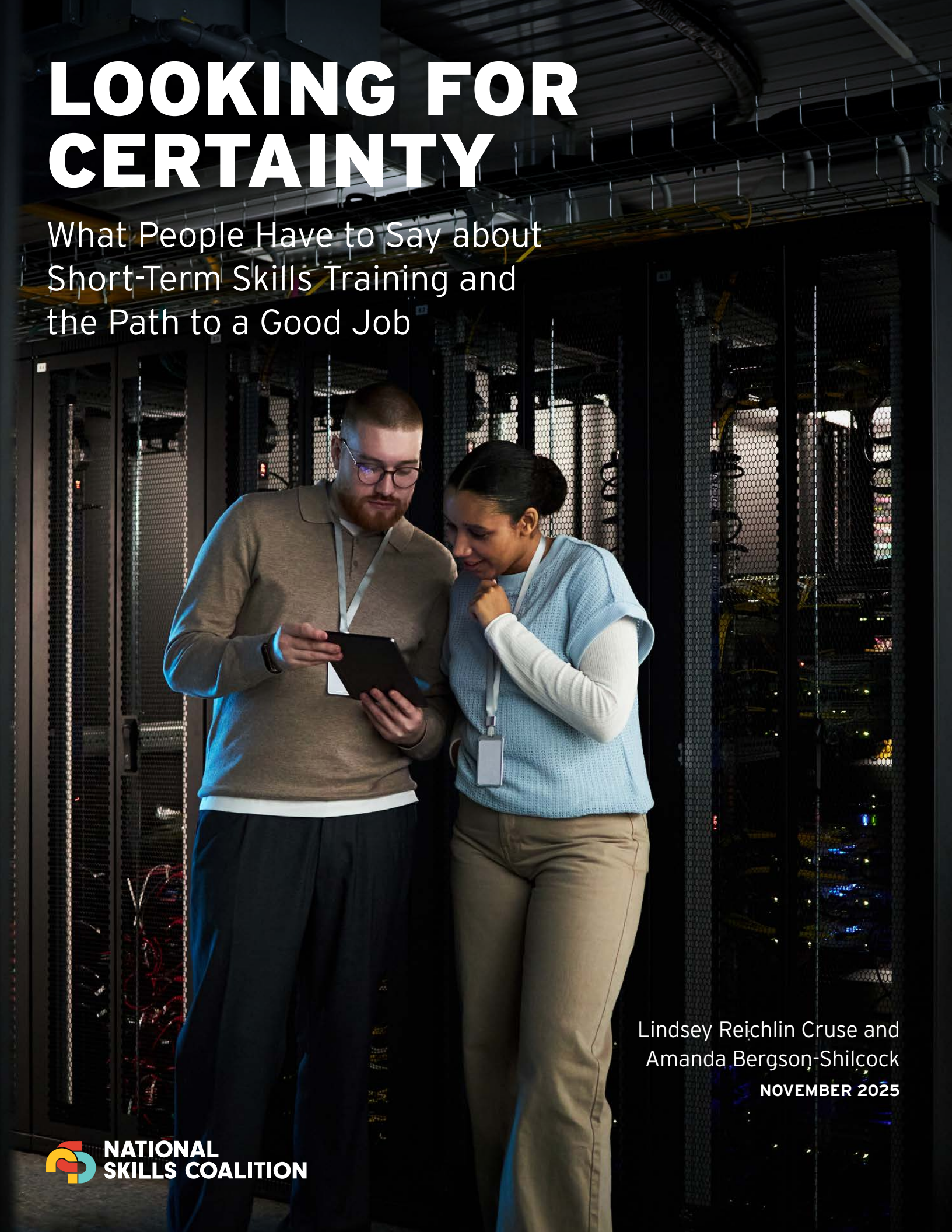
LOOKING FOR CERTAINTY

What People Have to Say about Short-Term Skills Training and the Path to a Good Job



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NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION

KEY INSIGHT

Workers are eager to pursue short-term skills training as a pathway to better jobs. But without good information about the quality of a program or how it will connect them to employers, people aren't able to choose programs that reliably deliver on that promise.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the country, more adults are turning to short-term skills training as a relatively fast and affordable path to better jobs. State and federal policymakers have long sought to ensure that short-term skills training truly delivers economic mobility for workers and meets business needs. As Workforce Pell expands access to these kinds of programs, it is more important than ever for policymakers and advocates to understand how short-term skills training programs are (and aren't) working for the people they are meant to serve.

To better understand how people are navigating choices about education and training options, and what factors help them achieve the results they want, National Skills Coalition spoke with thirty-four people across sixteen states who were enrolled in or had recently graduated from short-term skills training programs.

Their experiences reveal a key insight: Workers are eager to pursue short-term skills training as a pathway to better jobs. But without good information about the quality of a program or how it will connect them to employers, people aren't able to choose programs that reliably deliver on that promise.

Key Findings

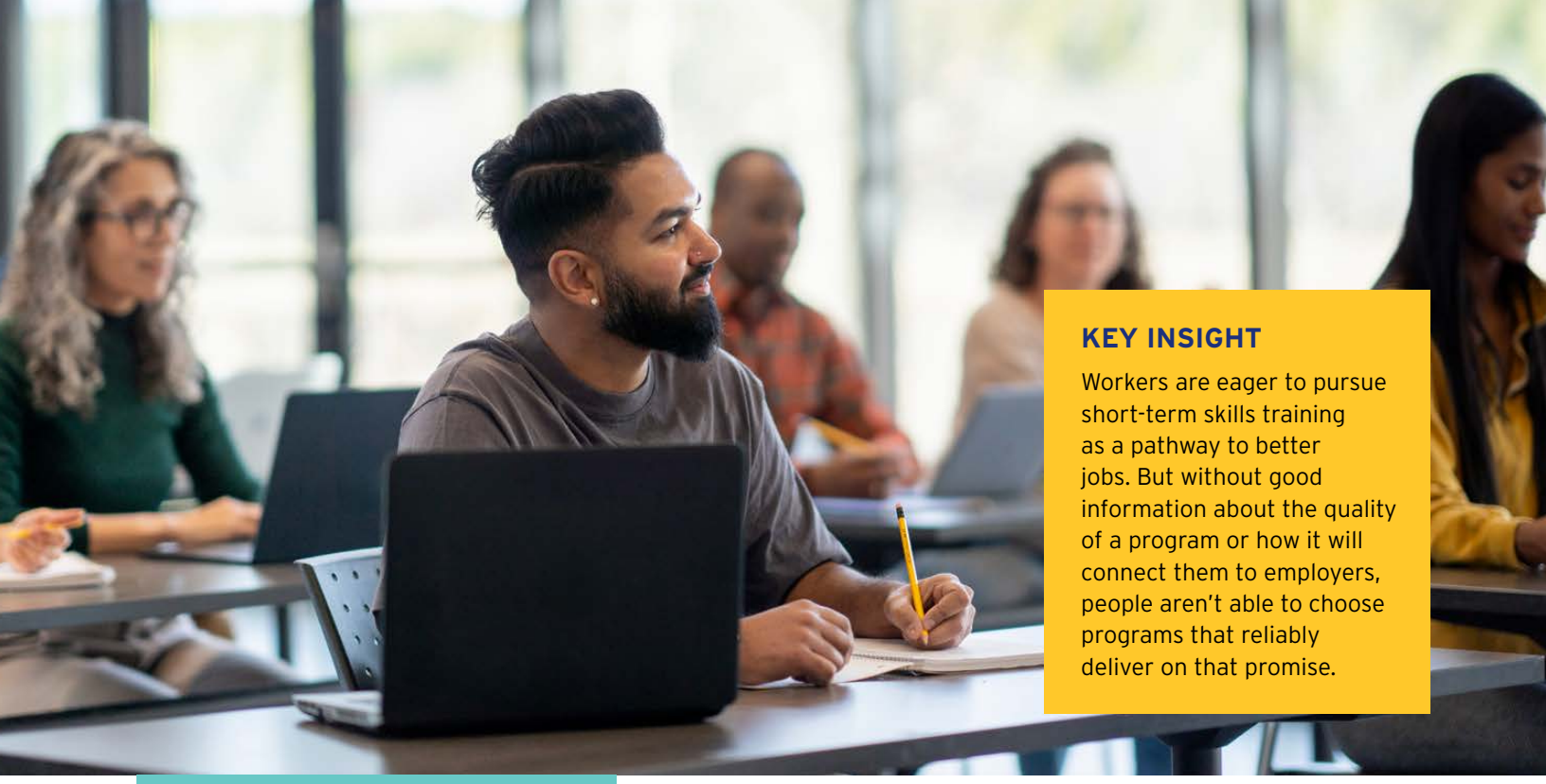
- **People see skills training as a path to better jobs and brighter futures.** Participants view skill building as essential to improving their earnings, stability, and prosperity, as well as an opportunity to set an example for their families. Specifically, most said that they enrolled in skills training because they wanted to gain skills that would help them start a new career.
- **Affordability and flexibility drive decisions.** Workers are keenly aware of both the financial and opportunity costs of participating in a training program. Most people chose programs based on cost and convenience.
- **People want to know which programs pay off, but that information is hard to find.** Despite their efforts at due diligence, many people reported that there was limited or no information available on program outcomes, particularly around job placement.
- **Paid work-based learning and employer partnerships are key to strong outcomes.** For the most part, people who did find a job participated in programs that had substantive links to employer partners and/or provided work-based learning opportunities. People whose programs didn't make those connections often struggled to turn credentials into employment.
- **Accessibility matters.** People with disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, or prior involvement with the justice system faced more barriers and benefited most from flexible, remote, and supportive programs.

Policy Implications

NSC's conversations with skills training participants show that, while affordability is essential, affordable skills training by itself is not sufficient to help people achieve better employment outcomes and economic success. Policymakers can ensure that short-term training fulfills its promise by:

- **Ensuring all people have access to affordable, high-quality training programs** with proven outcomes without significant cost. The recent expansion of federal Pell Grants to short-term programs (Workforce Pell) is a step in the right direction.
- **Requiring more transparency** from programs about their completion, exam passage, and job placement rates.
- **Facilitating strong partnerships and collaboration** between education and workforce training providers and employers to align with local labor market needs.
- **Incentivizing and subsidizing the provision of more paid work-based learning opportunities** so that workers can gain the hands-on experience employers require.
- **Supporting workforce providers in offering holistic and basic needs supports** including career navigation, transportation, child care, and other supports that enable people to fully participate.

These steps would help create an education and workforce system that delivers for students and local businesses by ensuring that short-term skills training reliably leads to good jobs and meaningful economic mobility.



KEY INSIGHT

Workers are eager to pursue short-term skills training as a pathway to better jobs. But without good information about the quality of a program or how it will connect them to employers, people aren't able to choose programs that reliably deliver on that promise.

What is Workforce Pell?

Workforce Pell, a federal law passed in July 2025, expands Pell Grant eligibility to high-quality, short-term training programs lasting 8 – 15 weeks (150-600 clock hours). For the first time, people will be able to use Pell Grants — the nation's largest student financial aid program — to pay for accelerated, career-focused training that leads to in-demand jobs. The law requires these programs to: prepare students for high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand fields; meet employer hiring needs; lead to stackable and portable credentials; show strong completion and job placement outcomes;[3] and meet certain earnings requirements. Workforce Pell is expected to launch in July 2026. If implemented well, it will help people gain skills for higher wage careers and give employers a pipeline of trained talent. But it must be paired with strong quality standards, clear links to good jobs, and student supports to truly fulfill its promise.[4]

INTRODUCTION

The United States faces a pivotal moment in higher education and workforce development policy. New federal student financial aid has been established for short-term credentials (known as Workforce Pell). Meanwhile, states have invested substantially in short-term skills training, including programs for recently unemployed workers, veterans, and adults re-entering the workforce after an absence.[1] The collective focus on workforce-aligned education and training that effectively builds talent to meet business needs is stronger than ever.[2]

At the same time, however, economic uncertainty is raising the stakes for people's decisions to pursue an education or workforce pathway. People are keenly aware that some paths don't lead to a good job and carry heavy financial consequences and significant opportunity costs as a result. And as public investment in short-term programs and pathways increases both federally and at the state level, policymakers are likewise aware of the risks of directing resources towards programs that do not yield positive outcomes for students or businesses.

To better understand how people are navigating choices about education and workforce training options, and what factors help them gain the results they want, National Skills Coalition (NSC) spoke with thirty-four people across sixteen states who were enrolled in or had recently graduated from short-term skills training programs (mostly non-college, nonprofit programs; see the Appendix for more information about NSC's study). Learning from these people's experiences can provide policymakers and other leaders with important and practical insights into how they can improve skills training career pathways so that they reliably result in value for people's lives and leave them better off than before enrolling.

NSC's conversations sought to uncover how and why people pursue skills training programs, whether programs help them achieve their education and career goals, and what they would want to change to improve their experience in the future. NSC's research reveals that skills training alone — without clear quality signals and transparent outcomes data, intentional links to employers, and affordable and flexible program options — is not enough to translate into concrete economic mobility.

To truly ensure that skills training leads to good jobs that promote meaningful economic mobility, policymakers must learn from people with lived experience and follow their guidance in designing education and workforce policy. This paper outlines the implications for public policy based on these experiences.

HOW PEOPLE MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT SKILLS TRAINING

NSC's conversations revealed trends in why people decide to pursue short-term training and the factors that influence their decisions. By and large, people are interested in skill building as a route to achieving their career and economic goals. They face real affordability barriers to pursuing education and workforce training, however, which ultimately play a major role in their choice of program.

People See Skills Training as a Path to Better Jobs and Brighter Futures

Across the board, the people that NSC spoke with recognized that building their skills and acquiring new credentials has the potential to help them get a job, advance in their industry or change careers, and achieve the economic mobility and self-fulfillment they are looking for.

Specifically, the large majority said that they enrolled in skills training because they wanted to get their foot in the door to start a new career. Others were motivated by the desire to advance within their current industry, bolster their own small business, or pursue a personal interest or hobby.

Most people had a clear vision of what a good outcome would look like: Earning more money, having better benefits, and advancing their careers. Some people also expressed a desire to work in a field that they found more personally fulfilling and rewarding.

Many people also emphasized that they were pursuing more education partly because they wanted to provide and set a good example for their children. As one mother described:

> *"That was something that was huge to me — creating stability to where our kids don't want for anything. And I knew that our family was going to grow. So, we're like, 'okay, we're going to need a bigger car, we're going to need a bigger apartment. [Our baby daughter is] going to have her own needs…' [There are] all of these different things that [our family is] going to need, [that] you want to be able to help take care of."*

Shut Out of Jobs, People Turn to Training

A substantial number of people described the difficult conditions they faced in the labor market as a factor that spurred their decision to pursue skills training. They shared stories about ghost jobs and employment scams, hostile working environments, and AI resume reviews that weeded them out of contention for jobs before a human even saw their application. Some also cited increased competition for jobs in their field due to a recent influx of laid-off federal and tech-sector workers. One person described the impact of sending endless job applications with no response:

> *"Going through these job searches and coming up blank over and over again, whether people admit it or not, it becomes demoralizing. You…feel displaced. You feel like you're getting left behind or like you're obsolete."*

Many people described challenges they faced in getting a job without having a bachelor's degree. These experiences increased their interest in alternative training and career paths that would help them communicate their skills to prospective employers.

> *"But without a college degree, it is a little more difficult to get people to… take a chance on me, even though my talents are better than a lot of people with [a degree] … It is [tough] to prove that to people."*

Economic circumstances also affected people's decisions about skills training. Many people emphasized that they could not afford to pursue a degree and that they wanted a faster and less expensive route to getting the skills and credentials required by employers. A few specifically mentioned that they were already carrying student debt from earlier educational experiences and could not afford to take on more.

People Seek Training That's Affordable and Fits Their Lives

Workers are keenly aware of both the financial and opportunity costs of participating in a training program. Their choice of program often comes down to the one that will cost them the least while still providing the value they are looking for — namely, skills and credentials that will help them advance their career goals in a particular field. For people with limited resources, their priority is finding the most affordable program that can help them achieve their goals. Programs that are especially desirable are those that are completely free or even offer a stipend to offset the opportunity cost and financial burden of taking time off from work for training.

> *"One challenge I've faced is balancing financial responsibilities with pursuing further education and training. At times, it's been difficult to commit to long-term goals while managing immediate needs. However, programs that offer paid training or OJT [on-the-job training] have helped bridge that gap and kept me motivated to continue moving forward."*

High on people's list of priorities is how a training program will fit into their daily lives, including their ability to work and care for their families. Many people — especially single mothers, people with other caregiving responsibilities, and people with disabilities — were interested in elements of accessibility like remote or hybrid programs, multiple schedule options, or asynchronous course delivery.

As one woman explained, she had spent years in the restaurant industry and now wanted a more stable, flexible career path with higher wages. But as the caregiver for her aging mother and an adult son with autism, she also needed an accessible training program that would allow her to attend from anywhere, be it home or the doctor's office.

Program length was also a factor. Most workers wanted to have confidence that pursuing training would be a limited, temporary disruption to their normal lives that felt worth the sacrifice, especially if the program was not free or did not offer a stipend to cover lost wages.

HOW ACCESSIBILITY SHOWED UP IN NSC'S FOCUS GROUPS

Nearly one-third of the people that NSC interviewed for this project (ten people) self-reported as having a disability and/or having been incarcerated. These numbers reflect the prevalence of these issues among the U.S. workforce generally.[5] Both groups of workers face particular challenges in finding and accessing training programs and suitable employment.

In the case of formerly incarcerated people, entire careers may be closed off to workers with felony convictions because of restrictions in state occupational licensing laws.[6] Information about these restrictions is often confusing or hard to find, and training program staff may be inexperienced in helping people with records find career pathways that will welcome them. This can lead to significant opportunity costs if a person enrolls in a training program without knowing that they will be excluded from employment in that occupation.

On the flip side, some people can participate in high-quality short-term training programs while they are incarcerated. One participant in NSC's study described an exceptionally good experience with such a program at the prison where she was incarcerated. She reported that it had done an outstanding job of preparing her to move seamlessly into well-paying employment upon release. However, she noted that hundreds of people had applied for just eight training slots — an indicator that demand for good training programs among incarcerated people far exceeds available supply.

For workers with disabilities, challenges related to access can make it difficult to enroll in or complete programs. Several people in NSC's study described the juggling act they had to perform in order to find a training program that would work for their needs. In some cases, this led to people choosing a program because of its remote or flexible schedule, even if the industry focus or program outcomes were not ideal.

Their experiences underscore the importance of paid training opportunities and holistic supports, so that workers can participate in skill-building programs without the additional stress of trying to work a second job and/or navigating a physically demanding commute or schedule. It also emphasizes the importance of high-quality career navigation assistance and strong employer relationships, so that program staff can help students with disabilities find employment where they will flourish.

People Want to Know Which Programs Pay Off, but Data is Hard to Find

People considered various factors to assess a program's reputation and likelihood of yielding positive outcomes. Those who learned about their program from a trusted friend, contact, or family member often expressed trust in its legitimacy and value due to that personal recommendation.

Others described gathering information independently to verify a program's credibility and understand its outcomes for graduates. Typically, workers did this via a general search engine query, by reading the program's own website, or by searching online discussion forums like Reddit. They described trying to ascertain whether a given program was reputable (versus a scam) and whether there was available data on program completion, exam/certification passage, and job placement rates. For example, one person described explicitly asking his program for more information on completion rates before signing up:

> *"I didn't want to go into a program where ninety percent of people fail… They didn't tell us the failure rate right off the bat, but I knew that's what I needed to hear… [to] feel comfortable about making that commitment. They said 'Wow, that's a good question,' [and told me that] probably thirty to forty percent of people would fail or drop out."*

Despite their efforts at due diligence, however, many people reported that there was limited or no information available on program outcomes, particularly around job placement.[7] What information they did find usually came from the program or organization itself. In-house data provided by program providers can have its own pitfalls; namely, it is not always clear how recent it is, whether it refers to a truly representative group of participants or a selective subset, and whether it has been validated by any external source (such as a third-party evaluation firm or public agency).

Ultimately, the deciding factor for most individuals was whether a program was affordable to them. In particular, free tuition or a stipend's availability seemed to override other considerations, such as whether the program had a good completion rate or a track record of getting graduates into jobs. Knowing that they would not be paying for a program helped applicants excuse weak or absent data on program quality.

One person said explicitly that she thinks programs should be more transparent about success and employment rates for graduates. However, the program she chose did not actually provide that information. She explained:

> *"[H]ow they sold us on everything was the no-cost [nature of the program] … you sort of let that piece [lack of data on training outcomes] slide because you weren't investing financially."*

WHAT PEOPLE GET OUT OF SKILLS TRAINING AND THE FACTORS AT PLAY IN THEIR OUTCOMES

By and large, workers expressed appreciation for (and satisfaction with) their skills training experience. However, a significant share of them did not actually end up with a job, or the job they wanted, after completing their programs.

The disconnect between their positive feelings about their program and actual progress toward their career goals may suggest effort justification — that is, people wanting to believe their time and hard work were not wasted. But when it came to real results for people's career advancement, NSC's conversations revealed some specific elements that seem to boost a program's likelihood of helping workers get a job.

Skills Training Helps People Gain Skills and Confidence

Nearly everyone interviewed by NSC said that their participation in a training program helped them gain skills that were valuable for employment, including technical skills as well as general skills related to job searching, networking, and personal promotion (e.g., learning how to set up a LinkedIn profile).

People also described increased confidence in themselves, their skills, and the value they could bring to a potential employer. Particularly in the context of a tight — and sometimes hostile — labor market, people expressed appreciation for gaining access to programs that helped them feel relevant and have greater self-confidence in their job hunt. One person explained:

> *"Because [you] have that knowledge now, you can leverage yourself a little bit more. You can market yourself. You can...negotiate for more money because now you have...this skill that you're an expert in. You know this thing from top to bottom."*

People also shared appreciation for support they received from their programs. In particular, some workers mentioned their instructors as a major source of support, perhaps in part because their programs did not have other staff positions such as career navigators or student success specialists. Regardless, some instructors were praised for going above and beyond, helping students learn about and prepare for licensing or certification exams, providing advice and counsel about job opportunities, and providing insight into the informal practices and unwritten rules of their target industry.

In two cases, people expressed frustration about the limited resources and support that their program's leadership provided to their instructors, emphasizing that the instructors were paying to make copies of the curriculum out of their own pocket and were forced to find their own chairs and classroom space.

While Training Pays Off for Some, It Does Not Reliably Lead to the Jobs People Wanted

The overwhelming majority of workers participated in skills training because they wanted to build skills that would help them get a job in their field of interest. Generally, people who found the job they wanted reported improved economic stability and mobility. For example, one person shared that she had been able to rent her own apartment for the first time after finishing her program and getting a job, and she was still living in that apartment two years later.

However, about a third of people were not employed at all, and a subset of those reporting employment did not have permanent jobs in their chosen field. For example, some had temporary jobs, short-term paid fellowships, or were working for the training programs they had just completed (presumably as a stopgap while they searched for roles in their field of training). Those who were unemployed were job hunting and/or had enrolled in further training to get more skills and credentials they hoped would help increase their competitiveness on the job market. Only one had left the labor market, and even she planned to return to work as soon as her infant was old enough.

Work-Based Learning and Employer Partnerships are Key to Strong Outcomes

For the most part, people who did find a job participated in programs that had substantive links to employer partners and/or provided work-based learning opportunities. Many people emphasized that after finishing their programs, they found that prospective employers highly valued applicants with industry experience. Training programs that provided a mechanism to gain that experience through work-based learning gave their participants a substantial leg up in the job market.

For programs that offered work-based learning, variables such as pay and convenience were factors in whether people were able to take advantage of the opportunity. Unpaid externship requirements, or inflexible options that required excessive commutes, represented barriers to participation even given the clear value of work-based learning in helping people achieve their employment goals.

For one working mother, the choice to complete her program, which required participation in a four-week, unpaid externship, had real consequences for her short-term economic stability. While this participant did ultimately find employment in her chosen field, her story highlights the economic risks that many people weigh when making decisions about education and training:

> *"I was working full time and going to classes after work as a mom. Having to quit my job at the time to be able to complete my [unpaid] externship [led me to be] unemployed for almost five months after completing the program."*

For people who had not found a job at all, or had not found a job they wanted, the lack of clear bridges from their training program to local employers played a significant role. Without a built-in opportunity for work-based learning, many found themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place when looking for a foot in the door with employers, who often required work experience in the industry in addition to credentials. As a result, people felt like they were on their own looking for internships or externships after graduation, often without success. As one person described the landscape:

> *"Entry level jobs are looking for a master's degree and seven years' experience. I mean, come on. [My] goal has been looking for the elusive thing called apprenticeships or externships, which are very, very, very, very few and far between. [There are] tons of internships, but of course they're only for people in college."*

Most programs without direct employer partnerships did provide some job search support for learners. For example, people described receiving emails from program staff about job openings in their field or being invited to job fairs or talks where employers would share information about their business. However, most programs were unable to make a direct referral for job interviews or placement.

One person described his surprise at learning that his training program did not have explicit partnerships with employers. He described reevaluating his goals upon learning this; while at first, he had hoped to get a job directly from the program, he decided he could not count on this as a realistic outcome and instead focused simply on acquiring new skills:

> *"They don't really have the employer partners to be able to do any sort of job placement or recommendations. [They] have career coaching, we get resume help, we have [access to] a job board, but it's not really [the same as] connecting us personally with one company and saying this [person] is a good fit, you should give this person a look… And that's what I was expecting from the program in the beginning. [But when] I realized that wasn't going to happen, I was like, well, there's still a certification, I'll still finish it. It is what it is."*

Highly Regulated Fields Tend to Deliver More Reliably

People pursuing fields that are highly regulated and have clear licensing and training requirements, such as health care or the municipal utility sector, were more likely to achieve their specific education and career goals.

For example, several people who attended medical assistant programs as an interim step on their career path to other health care careers described their experiences with externships set up for them by their programs. While not all of them were later hired by the specific employer where they had completed their externship, the fact that they had acquired real-world work experience helped them get a foot in the door with other employers. At the time of the focus groups, most of the people who had participated in health care training programs reported having successfully found a job as a medical assistant or entered a nursing degree program.

Another person described his journey toward a job in the water treatment industry, which like health care is more tightly regulated, with many roles requiring formal certification or licensure. He had previously tried several times to change industries but had not found a good fit. His transition to the water sector was a complex and lengthy process that involved navigating the municipal employment system as well as a mix of training and licensing requirements. But ultimately, he was successful:

> *"[Through my training program,] I got certifications, experience, and started to get the job offers I needed. Now I am a water treatment operator trainee and about to be promoted to treatment operator and about to send my application packet to get T3 certified in the state of California. The training gave me a solid foundation and understanding of the frameworks I had to navigate. This culminated with the first opportunities to gain experience [through] an internship and separate training position. That really helped me switch careers."*

PEOPLE'S REAL EXPERIENCES WITH SKILLS TRAINING REVEAL HOW PUBLIC POLICY CAN DELIVER STRONGER OUTCOMES

NSC's conversations with skills training participants demonstrate that affordable skills training, while essential, by itself is not sufficient to help people achieve better employment outcomes and economic success. While many people who had completed such programs described gaining valuable skills and self-confidence, and making progress toward their education and career goals, roughly one-third did not get the job they wanted after graduation.

And while many people were able to find free and flexible programs – a prerequisite for their ability to enroll – affordability and flexibility by themselves did not automatically translate into quality outcomes.

This research underscores that certain elements are fundamental to an education and workforce system that delivers for students. These elements include direct connections to local businesses for paid work-based learning and job placement; proactive and transparent information about training, financial aid, and career options; quality career navigation support; and engaged and well-resourced program staff. Not coincidentally, these elements also help to ensure that training programs are producing graduates who have the skills local businesses need.[8]

Policymakers should draw on the experiences of skills training participants to advance stronger workforce and education policies that reflect these fundamentals. Specifically, policymakers should:

- **Ensure all people have access to affordable, *high-quality* training programs with proven outcomes without significant cost**. By building on the progress made by recent federal and state investments, policymakers can further reduce the affordability factor in people's decision making and instead allow them to focus on tangible evidence of whether a program will help them achieve their goals. The recent expansion of federal Pell Grants to short-term programs (also known as Workforce Pell) is a step in the right direction – if implemented with quality and equity at the forefront.[9] Greater affordability would also encourage people to take advantage of opportunities to stack multiple quality short-term credentials toward the attainment of a degree, allowing for even higher earning potential in the future.

DEFINING "HIGH QUALITY" SKILLS TRAINING

Skills training that leads to non-degree credentials has the potential to offer workers a pathway to better jobs, higher wages, and further postsecondary education and training.[10] However, while many non-degree credentials lead to strong outcomes, others have little economic benefit – especially for people of color and women.[11] Identifying quality programs matters so that working people do not waste their time and money on credentials that have little return on investment, do not lead to a good job, and further entrench economic inequity.

National Skills Coalition has worked with states around the country to define, measure, and quantify what makes a credential high quality.[12] That work has resulted in the development of key criteria for understanding and identifying what a high-quality non-degree credential should provide for students. These criteria include:

- **Substantial job opportunities:** People with the credential should have access to a significant number of job opportunities – more opportunities than they had without the credential.
- **Clearly defined competencies:** People should leave skills training programs equipped with competencies that align with the skills required for available job opportunities.
- **Improved employment and earnings outcomes:** People should experience better employment and earnings outcomes after obtaining the credential. Additional job quality indicators, such as health and retirement benefits, family and sick leave, and dependable hours, also matter.
- **Stackability:** People who have earned the credential should be able to pursue further education or training through career pathway programs, credit articulation and transfer agreements, and credit for prior learning.
- **Portability:** People should have more career options and greater mobility in the job market because the credential is recognized by a range of employers.

- **Require more data transparency from education and workforce programs about their completion, exam passage, and job placement rates.** Prospective students need to have full information when making high-stakes decisions about where to invest their time and talents. Similarly, education and workforce leaders, businesses, and policymakers need accurate information about outcomes to help inform programs, sector partnerships, and workforce policy and investments — including Workforce Pell. Policymakers should provide technical assistance and capacity building resources to education and training providers to help them collect and share relevant data, including data collected for Workforce Pell program approval.[13]
- **Facilitate strong partnerships and collaboration between education and workforce training providers and employers.** This includes increased investment in industry sector partnerships that bring employers together with community colleges and other workforce training providers.[14] These partnerships create essential lines of communication and strong relationships that help ensure training programs are responding to local labor market needs, and that local businesses are eager to hire program graduates. Partnerships can also lead to other positive outcomes, such as when businesses commit to hosting externs or hiring program graduates, and when training programs employ program staff who have recent industry experience and relevant relationships with employers.
- **Incentivize and subsidize the provision of more *paid* work-based learning opportunities**. These opportunities should include paid internships, externships, and apprenticeships, and should be accessible to people in skills training and without degrees. Paying people while they participate in work-based learning reduces their opportunity cost and enables them to gain real-world experience critical to meeting employers' needs without jeopardizing their economic security. Public policy can play an especially important role in supporting small businesses in creating such opportunities, because unlike larger companies they have less in-house capacity to stand up such programs on their own.[15]
- **Invest in broader information sharing, including career navigators, consumer information tools, the development of outreach campaigns, and partnerships with key community-based players.** Students are eager to understand the array of career pathways available to them, and the costs and benefits of pursuing training in particular occupations. However, the availability of this information is uneven, and it can be especially hard to find if a prospective student does not already know someone who works in their target industry. People may also need specialized support to help them find the training and career pathways that will work for them, particularly if they face barriers related to disability or previous incarceration. More robust and proactive information sharing would benefit workers and communities that lack detailed knowledge of high-quality, affordable education and training opportunities.
- **Support workforce providers in offering holistic and basic needs supports and resources for learners.** Helping people alleviate the financial and opportunity costs of education and training, such as through assistance affording and accessing transportation, child care, food, housing, and mental health services, would relieve them of the pressure to choose a program based on how cheap and/or short it is and allow them to focus instead on whether it would help them achieve their educational and career goals. This type of support can help increase access to skill-building opportunities for people who face roadblocks to training, such as people with low incomes, people with disabilities, parents, and other caregivers. Supports like career navigation, coaching, and mentorship would also help people make decisions about their education and careers with good information and guidance that maximizes their chances of success.

APPENDIX: ABOUT THIS STUDY

Through twelve focus groups conducted during the summer of 2025, National Skills Coalition (NSC) spoke with thirty-four people from sixteen states about their experiences with short-term skills training. Most participants attended programs offered by non-college providers such as nonprofit community-based organizations; four people attended programs offered by community colleges. NSC's conversations occurred virtually during hourlong sessions. NSC recruited participants through an email to education and workforce organizations who operate skills training programs or who have contact with community college students and nonprofit training program participants. Those organizations shared the opportunity with their networks via email, word of mouth, or social media. Participants received an honorarium for contributing their time and expertise to NSC's research.

Because of the snowball nature of the recruitment process, certain programs and states (e.g., California and Iowa) were overrepresented in NSC's sample. All prospective focus group participants completed an online screening form. This form was used to ensure that participants interviewed had a wide range of experiences and outcomes from their training programs (e.g., to remove potential biases such as only interviewing people with "success stories," also referred to as creaming).

Focus group participants were largely made up of adults twenty-five and older with at least some prior postsecondary education and a diverse set of life experiences:

- Most were adult learners: two thirds were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four; another four were ages eighteen to twenty-four and seven were age forty-five or older.
- Thirteen identified as Black, seven identified as white, six as Hispanic or Latine, and four as multi-racial; four people identified as another race or ethnicity, including Asian, Indian, "Brown American," and other.
- Fifteen participants were parents and nineteen did not have children.
- Seven identified as having a disability and three reported having experience with the justice system.
- Fifteen reported holding an associate degree or higher, ten reported holding a non-degree credential, and nine people had some college credit, but no degree or less as their highest level of education.
- Thirteen people had attended training programs for IT-related jobs, nine for health care, four in solar energy, three in manufacturing, and five in other industries.

ENDNOTES

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