

## ELECTRONIC FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

### Workforce Center Feedback: Why Adults Don't Want to Go to College

#### Context

*In response to a request from Commissioner Keith Kelly on behalf of the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, personnel from Montana's Job Service/Workforce Centers provided the following feedback reflecting their perspectives on why Montana's enrollment rates for adults is so low, compared to other states. Although the focus group format is not a scientific research approach, the overlapping themes in comments can be instructive.*

*Each dark bullet below represents a different individual's feedback. Bold print was added to emphasize major themes emerging in the comments.*

- Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the question of why, it seems, that many adults and dislocated workers do not seek post-secondary education. I have asked that of many who do not already have postsecondary education.
  1. They did not seek opportunity for post secondary, at a younger age, **because they did not like school in the first place**. Too boring, too much academics, a bad experience... Now, they, especially the younger workers, are **expectant of being able to get information instantly**, at their finger tips. "Don't make me wait and follow a lengthy regimen to learn what I want to know." The older worker is **just plain intimidated**, didn't like it the first place and "now you want me to go back to school with a **bunch of kids**."
  2. The **financial commitment to school is too great**, with financial obligations at home and at school. This group sees this as taking on debt with no guarantees.

Combine the two and see what they are thinking...

- Job seekers are in crisis, extremely so; **financial and personal crisis** is forcing them to **focus on getting any kind of "get by" job they can get**. They tell me they can't afford the luxury of education at this point because it won't put food on the table right now.
- My feeling is that people **cannot AFFORD** to go to school...even if their education/training is paid for at 100%...because if they are in school...how can they hold down a job? Without a job...they can't pay their mortgages, rent, utilities, gasoline, food, etc. I think that is the #1 reason a person wouldn't choose to seek additional training and education. If you have a family and financial obligations, you simply can't set those aside while you go back to school. Most people are living paycheck to paycheck. So, people are forced to "keep doing what they're doing". If we could find some money to help people meet basic needs while they go back to school, perhaps more would be interested in furthering their education and training. But, until then **they're trapped!**
- Here's my feedback:
  1. **The local 4-year institutions don't often make themselves feel accessible to the non-traditional student**. They're branded as "young persons" institutions and the whole atmosphere and environment can be quite intimidating. Even the FAFSA training video speaks more towards younger people. I've encountered many people in the WIA program who've said that.

2. **The cost factor** is a HUGE barrier. Even with Pell and WIA, many are forced to take out loans which perhaps can make them uncomfortable at this stage and is something they're not willing to do.
3. **Committing to not working a full-time regular job**, for a length of time, especially when there are families involved, is a tremendous barrier. **Our local university doesn't offer night classes or flexible scheduling** to make it accessible to someone that must continue to work while attending school and our local COT has a long ways to go in curriculum development for degree completion, associates, and bachelors. I've even been interested in furthering my education towards a master's degree, while working, and haven't because the classes at MSU aren't accessible to me, outside of working hours. I think this and cost are two of the largest issues. More online programs would help this slightly, but even then, many people really want and need the experience of being in a physical classroom.
4. **Time.** Many of them, at this stage, are hesitant to invest even 2 years, let alone 4, retraining. They see it as such a large amount of time at this point in life that it is almost overwhelming. Especially when they feel panicked, now, regarding income and becoming re-employed. They can't fathom waiting 2 or 4 more years. I struggle with this in the WIA program. **They want training to be in, out, done and bam, re-employed.** Once they realize that, in most cases, that is not the reality, they shy away from the undertaking, ESPECIALLY when the local providers aren't flexible to the non-traditional student (i.e., night classes...If I could mention that 1 million more times, I would. Night classes would be HUGE!)
5. Identifying WHAT to do is also troublesome, even with MCIS and the other assessment tools. **The market is changing so rapidly that many people are having a hard time predicting what the best move will be.**
6. I see many people give up even asking for WIA when they realize that in most cases, **all the training does is give them the training, and does NOT set them up with a specific job.** The job search factor still remains, with or without the training. The training just makes the job search a bit easier.
7. **Lack of basic skills.** Many currently displaced workers lack some of the most basic skills in, for example, **areas like computers.** The task of learning that, plus getting back into the school mindset is hard. Often they give up before beginning, regardless of what resources we offer.
8. In many cases, they feel that **they aren't the "school-type"** and that is why they went into trades in the first place. I hear that a lot in the WIA program. **Helping them understand the difference between pursuing a degree and what they encountered in high school is tricky.**

In summary, if schools could:

- a. add night classes/flex scheduling,
- b. add more online certificate/degree programs,
- c. market more to the non-traditional student and make them welcome,
- d. offer advanced "career and education counseling" to help these people redirect their efforts once enrolled, since their career preparation needs are so much different than those of a younger student and because the market is changing so rapidly,

- e. offer a basic "college readiness" class to get them the skills needed (i.e. computers, note-taking) and back into the swing of things in a non-intimidating way (outside of adult ed offerings)
- f. identify different ways to financially help the non-traditional student, even if that meant something as simple as childcare assistance ...

... enrollment from dislocated workers, I think, would increase dramatically.

- In the Flathead Valley, we are seeing an increase in the Adults and Dislocated Workers wanting to attend post-secondary education. This increase could come from the knowledge in our community that many of our large layoff groups (Plum Creek Sawmill, Columbia Falls Aluminum Company and Semitool) are eligible for the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program (TAA). This program provides retraining and extra unemployment to get through a two-year program. Unfortunately, the Dislocated Worker program does not provide additional unemployment insurance so workers cannot afford to go to training once their unemployment has ended. Below are some of the comments we have heard from our Dislocated Workers to why they cannot attend post-secondary education.

It is a financial burden:

- **Unemployment (benefits) normally only last six months**, which is not long enough to get through a two year degree
- Unemployment pays half or less than half of the income they had prior to layoff
- **WIA Dislocated Worker budgets are not large enough** to pay for every Dislocated Worker to attend training and it's hard to afford training on your own
- Concerned that **if they do not work they will run out of money** and school is an economic burden because they are supporting a family

There are also non-traditional student concerns:

- **Schools are geared more towards traditional clients** as opposed to the needs of non-traditional students.
  - There are not **enough evening classes or daily classes** that meet the demand of these workers (i.e. daycare, etc).
  - Not **enough daycare options or tutoring** for non-traditional students
  - **Adult workers aren't able to see the advantages** of having a higher degree over the economic advantage.
  - Dislocated Workers feel **they have been out school for such a long time** and they lack the confidence to tackle post-secondary education.
  - They are **intimidated by the process of going to school** or **do not believe they have the aptitude to attend college**
  - Many adult learners or non-traditional students are **afraid of going back to school for personal reasons: did bad in high school, poor feelings of self worth, no personal value attached to education.**
  - There are many who **do not have a high school diploma** and who have set self-imposed limitations to what they are capable of or willing to accomplish
  - **Limited local training programs available** and **most workers cannot leave the area for training because of family and finances**
  - Need to have Dislocated Workers be the recruiters to this population to assist people through this process.
- It is because **people are working and can't give up their income** to attend school. Dislocated Workers are used to going to work and paying their bills and have mortgages,

car payments etc. and get in a panic when they lose their jobs/income and focus more on job search than training.

- Many **need to get a job right away to get back medical benefits.**
- They **don't want to take out student loans later in life** and have more obligations to pay.
- A certain amount (usually with a spouse who is working) consider training because they don't want to go through another layoff and somehow believe with training and/or with a degree in hand they will be less likely to lose the next job.
- I have dealt with 100's of Dislocated Workers over the past 18 years and following is my theory about participation in training.

Most laid off workers who fall under the traditional WIA Dislocated Worker criteria have **well-established financial obligations**: house and vehicle payments, kids in college, etc. Under the WIA Dislocated Worker program, **there is no provision for financial support other than approximately 6 months of Unemployment Insurance benefits.** In most people's circumstances, this makes **anything other than short-term training unrealistic**, even if tuition and books are paid by the WIA program, since they would have no way to meet their financial obligations after their Unemployment benefits run out. **Pell Grant monies** must go towards tuition first, so they are **not a reliable source of income support.**

On the other hand, if a group of Dislocated Workers qualifies for TAA benefits, the participation in training is much higher due to the fact that the **TAA program provides income support in the form of TRA and UI benefits for up to 104 weeks** or more and also provides assistance with the cost of maintaining two households if the training facility is out of town.

- We have quite a rural perspective .... Staff here identifies several reasons why individuals don't seek post-secondary education. In many cases we are dealing with **single-parent families.** For these families, even a lower-wage paycheck is critical. When individuals evaluate the cost of going back to school, they must realistically consider that they will **not be able to work full-time**, and they will **need additional daycare for their children.** Daycare is extremely expensive, and a part-time paycheck is not enough to make ends meet. Additionally, if they go to school during the day and try to work at night, there is very little daycare available for those hours.

Many consider the amount of time it will take to obtain a degree, and are **not able to balance work and paycheck needs with that time commitment.** They feel they are better off to **get any type of job and keep working**, rather than the potential of the job opportunities available with education. They also consider that many jobs in this region do not require post-secondary education, so **the benefit of education in terms of potential earning power is not always recognized.**

Of the job seekers we see in both Lake and Sanders Counties, **many do not have their GED or high school diploma.** Going back to school to obtain that can be **intimidating.** **Local GED facilities are facing funding shortages** in Lake County. The GED opportunities in Sanders County are extremely limited. **The thought of going to college is often intimidating as well.** Sometimes **prior educational**

**experiences in high school or junior high were not extremely positive**, and individuals do not want to enter that environment or challenge again. They didn't do well in school in the first place, and have no desire to repeat that experience.

Rural areas have **very limited educational opportunities without major travel time and travel costs**. In the Thompson Falls / Sanders County area, there are no local post-secondary education facilities. Individuals from Thompson Falls that wish to pursue college or tech school must choose on-line (which is limited in scope and expensive or also requires some travel), or travel to Missoula (102 miles), Kalispell (108 miles), Libby for the FVCC satellite campus (90 miles), Pablo (SKC—90 miles), or Spokane (130 miles). Road conditions are unpredictable during the winter months, gas prices have been high, and travel is costly. Dislocated workers and lower-income adults do not have this kind of funding. Being away from home would also require child care and a good vehicle for travel. It's just not practical in many, many cases.

The other issue that arises is that **people don't see what jobs they could get**, even if they pursue an education. Jobs are limited and it doesn't always appear to be cost and time effective to take on education as a means to better employment. **Short-term training is oftentimes more attractive to individuals in these circumstances**. CDL training is fairly popular, and this helps individuals with opportunities for better-paying jobs. Certified Nurse's Assistant training is also frequently chosen, and jobs may generally be found in this line of work, though the wages may not be especially good.

If people already have a job, they are reticent to leave that work in order to pursue education for a better job. The philosophy is that **any job is better than no job**. **Sometimes people are able to arrange to do both, but this is not always possible**.

**School costs** are another consideration. While there are PELL grants available for education, these don't cover all the education costs—and sometimes there is little left to help at times with living expenses. For individuals who are barely eking out a living, out-of-pocket costs for school do not have priority over out-of-pocket costs for food, shelter, and other necessities. Funding sources such as WIA programs can help considerably, but those funds are also limited. Some dislocated workers have unemployment benefits that help support their living expenses while in school. This is a critical component which helps to determine who can afford to go back to school. Dislocated workers who are eligible TAA (Trade Adjustment Assistance) benefits typically DO pursue post-secondary education opportunities. **This demonstrates that individuals are much more likely to pursue postsecondary education when costs of training are paid and there is income support as well**.

- We serve a 5-county area. There is only [one two-year college in the vicinity]. So for many **attending school means relocating to attend and maintaining 2 households** - not quite as easy as when you live where there is a college and a lot more expense. We do have **many that do distance learning but not all can be done that way and that way doesn't work for all**, especially someone that has never attended college before or hasn't or many years.