Redesigning Training Programs

for the COVID Era and Beyond

AT A GLANCE

Training and education will be key to helping displaced workers find stable jobs in the post-pandemic recovery, but programs need to be reimagined with equity at the forefront to ensure that they benefit everyone equally.

AUTHORS

Vanessa Bennett
Associate Director, **JFF**

Rachel McDonnell
Associate Director, **JFF**

Sandra Lee
Program Manager, **JFF**

Mary Ostrye
Higher Education Consultant

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Introduction

Black, Latinx, and low-income workers have been hardest hit by this pandemic-driven recession, and they will likely have the hardest time finding good jobs once the threat of COVID-19 has eased.

The stark reality is that many of the jobs that were lost won't be coming back. That means displaced workers will need training in order to find new jobs and get on a path to economic mobility.

Even prior to the pandemic, it was clear that education and training programs did not serve all populations equally well, and the shift to remote program delivery has added new barriers to access and success for low-income and underrepresented populations.

Education and training programs can play an important role in driving a more equitable recovery, but not without adaptation and innovation.

A Daunting Challenge

The inequities brought to light by the current unemployment statistics are impossible to ignore. According to the Strada Education Network, as of June 10, Black and Latinx workers had lost their jobs at a rate that was more than 50 percent higher than that of white workers, and half of all workers Strada

surveyed said they were concerned about losing their jobs. And a recent Pew Research Center report reveals that COVID-19 has primarily impacted workers who are women, Hispanic, immigrants, between the ages of 16 to 24, and without any college education.[2] Before the pandemic, workers of color were already overrepresented in low-wage work. Now, as some sectors of the economy slowly reopen, we are seeing that COVID has accelerated the pace at which jobs are being automated, and this automation-driven job loss is more common in occupations held by minority workers.[3] In addition, we already see white workers are getting hired back at twice the rate of Black workers.[4] Without deliberate intervention, recovery from COVID could end up widening existing income and wealth gaps.

It's clear that training must play a key role in addressing this problem. The demand for upskilling is there: At the end of August, Strada reported that the share of Americans who said they planned to enroll in an education program within six months had stood at about 20 percent since May, and 62 percent of those with enrollment plans had consistently expressed a preference for nondegree and skills training programs.[5]

But not everyone has equal access to training opportunities, and not all training opportunities deliver equitable outcomes.

These inequities have been exposed and exacerbated by the ongoing health care and economic crises. For example, the magnitude of the digital divide has become glaringly apparent as many training programs have had to shift to remote learning models during the pandemic.

Nonetheless, because we're in a moment of change and transition, we have an opportunity to make training programs more equitable. We can adapt existing programs and design new ones to better serve the immediate and long-term needs of workers—programs that not only teach people the skills they need to find new jobs quickly, but also provide them with lifelong learning opportunities.

Seeking Solutions

In this brief, JFF explores what training providers can do to adapt their programming in ways that put the country on a path to an equitable economic recovery. JFF conducted research to explore what education and training providers can do to design programs that emphasize equity and better serve individuals who face the most barriers to employment. In interviews with representatives of community colleges and community-based organizations (CBO), and with JFF employees who work directly with workforce boards and training providers, we focused on understanding

how the shift to remote delivery has affected training programs—both positively and negatively. We asked whether online learning enabled them to do things they previously could not do and encouraged them to discuss challenges they're facing and successes they've enjoyed.

One theme throughout our interviews was that the abrupt shift in program delivery has provided a unique to make changes that we have long known to matter for student success – such as creating more flexible learning options and focusing on transferrable skills. Based on what we learned, we came up with recommendations for ways in which training providers can reimagine and redesign their programs with an equity lens. Importantly, these recommendations will remain relevant beyond the current health crisis.

Our recommendations are based on these two cross-cutting design principles:

- Keep equity at the forefront
- Remain flexible and open to change

Those two principles in turn inform five design considerations that we believe training providers should take into account as they adapt and revamp their programming in the COVID era:

- Think critically about the use of technology
- Expand options for re-employment

- Adopt flexible programming models
- Support program staff
- Embrace partnerships

In addition to those design principles and considerations, there's another factor that we believe training providers should keep in mind, especially in this time of crisis: the impact of trauma that learners, workers, and program employees have experienced in their lives.

Guiding Principles

Our two guiding principles for training providers to embrace as they adapt their programs in response to the impacts of COVID-19 serve as the overarching guide for the five more detailed design considerations we put forth later. They should be front and center throughout all phases of design, implementation, and evaluation of programs.

Principle 1:
Keep Equity at the Forefront

Why is this important?

The pandemic and the recession are disproportionately impacting people from underrepresented communities. The decisions that training providers make as they adapt to the current reality will determine who can access and complete skills training—and those decisions will ultimately determine who will be able to find gainful, long-term employment during the post-pandemic recovery. If we want to come out of this crisis with a more equitable society, training programs must be intentional about adopting practices and policies that support those who have been most impacted by the pandemic.

What this looks like.

There are a number of ways that training providers are infusing an equity lens into program adaptation. Some are inviting program participants to participate in the design process. Others are adapting recruitment and outreach materials so that they appeal to a more diverse audience and integrating a Universal Design for Learning approach to training delivery. It's an ongoing process- providers must regularly assess how their adaptations are affecting different populations and make changes as needed.

Principle 2:
Remain Flexible and Open to Change

Why is this important?

Providers must always be prepared to adapt and reimagine their programs to better align their offerings with the needs of learners and the shifting dynamics of their local labor markets.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. education and training systems were known for being slow to change course.
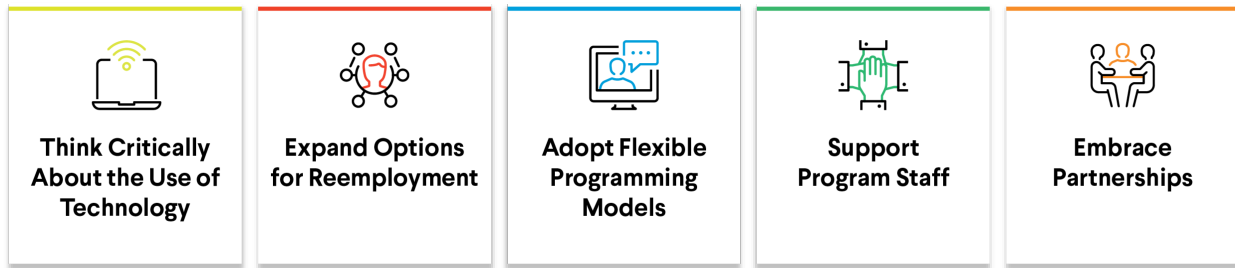
Policy and bureaucracy made it difficult to adapt curricula to changes in labor market or integrate new ways of engaging students and helping them learn. Employment-oriented training programs often focused on a narrow set of occupations, and many policies had unintended and disproportionately negative impacts on learners and workers of color.

As the pandemic has brought programs to a halt entirely or limited providers' ability to move work forward, practitioners have had to approach their work with new flexibility, in terms of both program delivery and labor market alignment. Even if we're one day able to return to business as usual, the most successful education and training programs will be those that are able to align with local labor market needs and continually adapt to ever-changing economic realities.

What this looks like.

The pandemic has made it clear that when necessary, training programs can move quickly to make changes. They can move administrative processes online, redesign assessments, and create new support structures for students. In part, the crisis forced a shift in mindset from "this is how we always done this" to "this is what our learners need right now." Even outside of a crisis, training programs should regularly be assessing whether their programs and policies are actually working for learners. The most forward-thinking programs have been able to view the shift to remote instruction as an opportunity to think about long-term transformation across all facets of their work, including organizational structure and capacity, policies and procedures, design of training and curriculum, and creation and expansion of partnerships.

Design Considerations

Think Critically About the Use of Technology	Expand Options for Reemployment	Adopt Flexible Programming Models	Support Program Staff	Embrace Partnerships

Through our research, we identified five design considerations that training providers may want to keep in mind as they adapt, and ideally improve, their programs in response to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. A range of practitioners and programs, including community colleges, workforce boards, and CBOs, have adopted promising practices that reflect and embody these design considerations, which in turn are shaped by the two aforementioned guiding principles.

Here are more detailed discussions of each of the design considerations, with examples of ways in which training providers have incorporated them in newly reimagined programs.

Think Critically About the Use of Technology

While the pandemic has forced many training programs to move online, training providers must keep equity in mind and take the needs of their participants into consideration as they decide when and how to use technology.

The Challenge

As they adjust to the realities of the COVID-19 era, training programs have had to learn how to deploy and use virtual learning environments and figure out how to deliver hands-on activities and other core elements of their programs remotely. Remote instruction often requires technologies that the program hadn't previously used, such as videoconferencing tools and online recruiting platforms.

But one of the biggest hurdles programs face as they pivot to online models is that not all learners have equal access to remote training programs. Many don't have the technical systems and other resources they need to take a class remotely, including laptops, tablets, or other devices, internet access, and even a quiet place to study and sit in on online classes. Black and Latinx individuals and people who live rural areas or low-income households disproportionately face barriers to accessing technology.[6] For many learners, limited access to technology is compounded by a lack of digital literacy.

Programs and their employees often face similar constraints, especially if they don't have previous experience working with digital platforms, can't afford licenses for software or other systems, or are unable to transition every component of their training to a virtual setting.

Promising Practices

To support equitable access to online learning for participants and staff, training providers should identify and prioritize components of their programs that can be transitioned to virtual settings. This could include the recruitment and intake processes, the delivery of in-class coursework, and the administration of assessments. A variety of systems can be used to facilitate online learning including social media platforms, nudging tools, videoconferencing systems, video assessments, and digital case management platforms.

Training providers should also take advantage of their current partnerships and forge relationships with new partners to increase their remote learning capabilities. Here are some benefits that programs might be able to offer students with the help of partners:

- Connections to Wi-Fi hotspots provided by the community
- Laptop loaner programs and computer lab access at local libraries

- Equipment donations from IT companies
- Digital literacy training for students
- Professional development training for program staff

Partnerships may be especially helpful when it comes to finding ways to offer hands-on learning experiences like on-the-job training, internships, labs, and health care clinical programs in virtual settings. For example, partners may be able to provide access to systems like interactive technologies and video assessment tools. However, if it is truly impossible to move certain activities online, training providers should make every effort to ensure that their facilities allow for safe, socially-distanced in-person learning—if local authorities allow in-person instruction at all.

Examples

Harper College, Palatine, Illinois
Faculty designed effective alternative ways for students to learn and demonstrate difficult concepts. For example, rather than having students work through complicated math problems on their own and write down the steps they took to arrive at the answer, instructors asked them to share their logic and approaches directly with the class by recording themselves as they work on the problems and talking through and justifying each step.

Workforce Council of Seattle-King County

To ensure that all workers would be able to have access to its full range of program offerings, the Workforce Council of Seattle-King County translated all of its written and online materials into more than 10 languages, moved case management online, and worked closely with service providers and the Washington state government to provide a wide range of services and supports to users. The council also collaborated with partners to address issues of digital literacy and access, and launched a community engagement effort and gathered and analyzed data to improve its practices and ensure that they are effectively serving the hardest-to-reach communities and populations.

Expand Options for Reemployment

Because the pandemic has forever changed the labor market, training providers must promote occupational mobility by offering programs that help workers develop skills that not only prepare them for the future of work but also are transferable among a wide range of industries and jobs.

The Challenge

As the novel coronavirus spread across the country, many industries suffered staggering job losses and are now struggling to get employees back to work. In the restaurant industry, for example, more than 8 million employees have been laid off or furloughed.[7]

In industries where jobs have remained filled, remote work has become the norm, and Gartner reports that, in a recent survey of corporate chief financial officers, 74 percent of the respondents said that the shift would likely be permanent for at least some of their employees.[8]

This new labor market uncertainty highlights a need to prioritize job training that promotes the cultivation of skills and competencies that are applicable to and transferable across a range of industries.

To put people in the best position to find new jobs and get on pathways that lead to careers that pay family-supporting wages and offer opportunities to advance, training providers must make occupational mobility a priority. Programs need to adapt their offerings to ensure that they connect learners to a wider range of industry pathways, and they must help participants become lifelong learners.

Promising Practices

Programs can prepare learners to navigate an uncertain labor market by emphasizing career exploration and using interactive platforms to provide mentoring, coaching, and one-on-one support. They can help participants understand the vast array of occupations their skills, competencies, and experience connect to, and help them understand what career advancement looks like within and across industries.

Programs should also expand their understanding of connections between occupations and the skills requirements they have in common. They can do this by partnering with other training or educational providers to make connections between programs and by expanding partnerships with local employers. Programs should also assess the current skills training they offer and can use the **Career OneStop Competency Model Clearinghouse** to identify alignment between various industries and sectors.

Here's a list of transferable skills, competencies, and personal characteristics to emphasize in training programs in order to promote occupational mobility:

- Digital literacy and fluency
- Interpersonal and communication
- Project management and problem-solving
- Accountability and initiative
- Professionalism
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Lifelong learning

Example

Café Reconcile, New Orleans
A FareStart **Catalyst Kitchen**, Café Reconcile has focused heavily on occupational mobility in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Its core training is centered on the culinary industry, but as restaurants and culinary apprenticeships

have struggled to regain their footing during the pandemic, Café Reconcile has had to create new occupational pathways for students and alumni. To do that, the program has focused on foundational skills and competency training and worked with employer partners in a variety of industries to identify skills that can transfer from the restaurant business to other sectors. This approach has helped to keep students engaged in training and help Café Reconcile graduates stay employed.

Adopt Flexible Programming Models

Because learners are dealing with a lot of uncertainty these days, programs should adopt flexible scheduling and delivery models that accommodate participants' ever-changing day-to-day circumstances.

The Challenge

The pandemic has made people's lives more unpredictable in multiple ways. Businesses are closing, then reopening again—and employees can't be sure what that means for their schedules. Some people don't know when—or even if—their furloughs will end. Some may be caring for family members. Schools are using hybrid models, so parents may have to juggle their own work and learning with the need to help their kids with online classes. If they adopt flexible models, training programs can help learners fit education and training

into their unpredictable schedules by enabling them to work ahead when time permits and step back when life gets busy again.

Promising Practices

Training providers that want to make their offerings more equitable and accessible can incorporate the following elements into their programs so that they're better able to accommodate learners' unpredictable schedules.

- **Competency-based education** models
- Modularized instruction—for example, breaking a 16-week course into four- or eight- week modules
- Use of simulations and interactive instructional technology to allow students to do lab-based instruction remotely and asynchronously

Example

Patrick Henry Community College, Martinsville, Virginia
To make remote learning more feasible, Patrick Henry Community College increased its use of simulations for health-related career and technical education programs to replace some in-person lab instruction. For example, instead of requiring health care students to demonstrate skill mastery in-person in front of faculty, the college now allows them to use web cameras to record

themselves as they perform tasks such as administering medications and taking vital signs.

Support Program Staff

Like learners, program staff members are dealing with a lot of new challenges. Training providers need to support their own workers and make sure they have the resources they need to do their jobs effectively.

The Challenge

COVID-19 has increased the risk of staff burnout because many programs are dealing with severely diminished organizational and financial capacity and their employees are shouldering increased workloads and struggling to maintain work/life balance. Staff members are adjusting to new processes, new tools, and new ways of teaching and working with participants. Many are working from home for the first time, and may also be struggling with childcare issues. Moreover, as training transitions to online settings, many program employees are having to learn new technologies and improve their digital literacy while adapting and delivering programming in real time. Adding to these challenges is the fact that funding for professional development is limited because many programs are facing budget shortfalls.

Promising Practices

To ensure that they are providing the best support possible to employees, and to help them deliver high-quality, accessible training, JFF recommends that training providers adopt the following field-informed best practices:

- Recognize and support emerging leaders across all levels of the organization.

- Involve instructors and training providers in conversations about policy and procedural changes so that they have a voice in program design.

- Meet with staff regularly to assess how things are going and make changes and adaptations as needed. Be flexible and open to pivoting your approach based on feedback.

- Encourage and promote self-care to help staff manage the complexities of this new way of working and avoid burnout.

- Offer a variety of professional development options, with multiple training providers to choose from.

Example

Broward Community College, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

To support faculty during this challenging time, Broward offers instructors an opportunity to meet with instructional designers during drop-in office hours. The school also provides frequent online professional development workshops on topics such as synchronous and asynchronous communication and how to use Blackboard Collaborate, a distance learning system.

Embrace Partnerships

At this time, training programs should not hesitate to seek support from partners—both internal and external.

The Challenge

The challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic are too much for most organizations to tackle alone. Pivoting to remote learning environments, reconfiguring training materials and classroom activities for virtual settings, overhauling outreach and recruitment strategies, providing services and supports to participants and keeping them engaged, and providing staff with support and resources create a tremendous burden for leaders of training programs. Therefore, at this moment in time it's crucial for programs to fully embrace their existing partnerships and actively try to expand and diversify their networks of partnerships.

Building networks of partners that include workforce development organizations, postsecondary institutions, employers, CBOs, and service providers can enable programs to move their work forward

without being overburdened by all the new challenges they're facing.

Promising Practices

As they seek to make the most of current partnerships and forge new ones, programs should first identify what activities and operations they "own"—what are their areas of expertise, and what do they have the capacity to focus on? From there, they should work closely with other organizations to fill in the gaps. This could mean collaborating with a CBO to provide housing, food, or child care assistance to program participants; working with a local library or community center to increase access to the technology required for online learning; or teaming up with an employer or a community college to administer components of job training programs.

Here are some examples of ways in which programs are leveraging their partnerships to respond to the new demands they're facing during the pandemic:

- Workforce boards and CBOs are continuing to convene their employer advisory groups, and they're engaging members of those panels in efforts to design work-based learning activities for virtual platforms. They're also hosting virtual job fairs to help keep participants connected to the workforce.

- Organizations of all kinds report that their partners are stepping up and working with them to meet immediate needs of learners.

- Cross-sector groups made up of training providers, workforce systems, employers, and other stakeholders are joining forces to learn about one another's concerns and craft solutions to problems.

Example

Ivy Tech Community College, Statewide, Indiana
To help meet the needs of community members, Ivy Tech has partnered with the Indiana State Department of Health to provide mobile COVID-19 testing services. It has also teamed up with local community groups set up mobile food pantries in college parking lots.

Important Consideration

Understanding the Impact of Trauma Experienced by Participants and Staff

Even before the pandemic, many learners and workers were grappling with issues such as food insecurity, income volatility, and the ongoing impacts of systemic racism. Those and other challenges have been heightened by the pandemic, a wave of natural disasters, and ongoing social unrest. And now, because of the pandemic and the ensuing recession, many people are dealing with family illness and loss, unemployment, social isolation, and school and child care closures.

In general, individuals who experience stress and trauma often have a difficult time navigating work, learning, and other daily activities, and the mounting array of concerns people are facing at this time could make it especially difficult to thrive in a training program. That challenge is exacerbated by the move to remote learning, because now, in addition to everything else, they are being forced to adapt to new ways of learning and more complex and difficult ways of accessing services.

As training providers redesign and adapt their offerings to reflect the new realities of the COVID era, it is crucial that they keep this fact in mind and continue to provide services and supports such as mentoring, case management, and help accessing social services as core elements of their programs. JFF recommends that programs explore opportunities to braid funding and use their online platforms to streamline access to services.

Conclusion

As the demand for training increases, it is critical that programs be designed with equity as a guiding principle to ensure that the people who have suffered the most during the current health care and economic crises get the support they need and are not left behind when the recovery begins.

However efforts to redesign and overhaul training programs must do more than respond to the current reality of our nation and of the world. This is more than just a moment—it's the start of a long journey. The goal isn't to go back to the education and training systems that existing before the pandemic – it's to build something better than what existed previously. Because the challenges we're facing and the potential solutions to those challenges are intersectional in nature, the advice and recommendations in this brief are designed to be versatile—developed not only for training providers, but also for all stakeholders working toward a **more equitable future**.

The design principles and considerations presented in this brief are grounded in the current reality, but at the same time, they allow room for innovation that leads to unconventional and bold changes. Equity, flexibility, and adaptability are critical considerations for not just training programs, but also as we build systems that will help us move forward on this long journey

JFF recognizes that our recommendations are bound to change as the world continues to wrestle with new and evolving crises, so we welcome all and any feedback, questions, and stories.

Methodology

JFF conducted research for this project primarily in August 2020.

We interviewed representatives of 13 community colleges, community-based organizations (CBO), and workforce development boards. We also spoke with eight fellow JFF employees who work directly with community colleges, CBOs, and other training providers. In addition, we included comments from community college faculty members who participated in an April 20, 2020, Achieving the Dream **virtual town hall** on the steps schools were taking to support students during the shift to remote learning at the onset of the pandemic.

The representatives of community colleges that we spoke with were campus leaders in academic affairs, career services, student services, accreditation and planning, and workforce development. Interviewees from CBOs and workforce development boards had titles such as CEO, chief innovations officer, and director of gateway initiatives.

The interviewees represented a geographically diverse collection of organizations based in 12 states on the East and West Coasts, and in the South and Midwest. The colleges ranged from single-campus institutions to a statewide system with 14 main campuses, and their undergraduate populations ranged from 2,000 to 75,000.

Endnotes

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