JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

IMPACT PROFILE: LACEY BOWMAN

ACCELERATING TO COLLEGE AND CAREER SUCCESS

All Lacey Bowman wanted at age 29 was a cashier job at a convenience store to help support her family, but not a single store was interested. After months of rejections, Lacey visited a workforce training center in South Texas and quickly learned what was wrong—she had little work experience and no high school diploma.

But Lacey resolved to fix the problem and set her sights even higher. A year later, Lacey has earned a GED and become a trained welder. She continues to attend college and is only a semester away from completing an advanced welding certificate. Now she faces much sunnier prospects—a starting hourly wage of $15 to $20 that typically rises to $30 to $50 in the region's booming oil and natural gas industry.

Lacey came to see brighter possibilities for her future through Accelerate TEXAS, a statewide initiative that helps adults jump-start careers through free basic skills courses integrated with practical job training and guidance into career pathways. Accelerate TEXAS works to achieve the state's Closing the Gap goals by delivering integrated adult education and career training; the initiative has already engaged over 3,800 adults in programs leading to certificates in key industry sectors. Jobs for the Future supports the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in running Accelerate TEXAS by providing technical and capacity building assistance.

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"I knew it was something I had to do no matter how hard it was," says Lacey, who lives in Victoria, Texas, with her boyfriend and two children, ages 7 and 10. "The only way I was going to be able to get a job was if I got some work experience under my belt. But I couldn't get hired and gain experience because I didn't even have a GED."

Lacey qualified for the SAIL (Students Accelerating through Integrated Learning) program at Victoria College where students can choose to become a certified nurse aide, electrician, truck driver, or welder—at no cost.

"The SAIL courses help students improve their reading, writing, math, and/or English-language skills to succeed on the GED," says Tiffany Johnson, director of Victoria College's Adult Education Center. "But the program goes a step further by offering training matched with local labor market needs. Having these skills opens doors for our students and generates momentum for pursuing higher career opportunities."

Victoria College is one of 13 community colleges and 8 college districts offering Accelerate TEXAS programs in response to growing demand for adult education and career services. JFF has expanded opportunities by using an innovative institutional mentor system. Rather than singularly constructing the program at each participating college, Accelerate TEXAS recognized the superior efforts and strong results of a group of "5-Star" colleges, and leveraged their work to mentor a new round of grantees. Victoria College, for example, receives peer coaching from Alamo Colleges, which are based in San Antonio. This mentorship model helps drive and scale the program's adoption throughout the state. In turn, JFF provides technical assistance, policy support, and strategic advice and communications. Through Accelerate TEXAS, 2,300 adults earned occupational certificates, and about 350 students have earned a GED between 2010 and 2013.

Though Lacey did well on a practice GED exam in spring 2013, she wanted to brush up on math to pass the real exam. With SAIL's support and resources, Lacey turned out to be the top GED scorer in the south region of Texas and she won $3,200 in scholarship funds from the Texas Association for Literacy and Adult Education to help pay for her college classes in advanced welding.

Growing up, Lacey had always envisioned attending college but ended up leaving high school due to peer-related problems. She became a mother of two shortly after, leaving her with limited time and resources to pursue her education. It wasn't until the SAIL program presented her with the opportunity to obtain a professional certificate that she decided to fulfill her dreams of going to college.

"Within one year, Accelerate TEXAS helped me get from zero job prospects, to a college education and a family-supporting career," Lacey said. "It created pathways for me that I didn't even know were possible."

Today, Lacey has a straight-A college average and feels confident enrolling in blueprint reading and machine shop math classes. Director Johnson says she is a role model to many. Lacey frequently visits the SAIL program to share her experiences and inspires adults who are struggling the way she was.

Lacey is also determined to keep her children motivated to complete high school and beyond. "A year ago, I didn't have anything going for me at all," Lacey says. "Now looking back at what I've accomplished, it's mind boggling. . . . I feel very accomplished. And I feel myself holding my head higher now."

Accelerate TEXAS addresses a critical workforce issue: At least 60 percent of Texas jobs will require a career certificate or college degree by 2020, according to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. And 44 percent of Texans over age 25 have never been to college, let alone earned a credential. Most Accelerate TEXAS students are pursuing credentials in health care, manufacturing, construction, and transportation.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board funds and coordinates Accelerate TEXAS. Jobs for the Future provides technical assistance, policy, and communication support. The Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University provides evaluation and peer-learning support.

Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy.

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TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 info@jff.org

88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110
122 C Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20001

WWW.JFF.ORG