

Building a Career Path Where There Was Just a Dead End

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NEW YORK -- Barely two years ago, Cristina Rodriguez and her three children were moored on the wrong side of the income gap. A high school dropout, she was making a little more than \$200 a week, stapling price tags to shirts and boxing them at a Modell's warehouse. "I didn't use my mouth, didn't use my mind; I only used my hands. I was always going to be broke," she said.

That, in human terms, is the crisis of opportunity for workers at the bottom of the economy. But unlike most of them, Rodriguez found a way out. Her route was an innovative approach to job training that is upending the conclusion, widespread in the 1990s, that training programs don't work. More and more governors are embracing the approach, and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben S. Bernanke recently called job training one of the most promising answers to the growing income gap.

Rodriguez attended a program called Per Scholas, which trains computer repair technicians in the nation's poorest congressional district, in the Bronx. Like dozens of programs around the country built on a similar model, it evolved by working closely with employers in high-growth sectors of the local economy, tailoring its training to the precise entry-level skills that were most in demand. Earlier training programs were much less targeted to the needs of labor markets.

In an ever-more-wired New York, Per Scholas places close to 80 percent of its graduates in jobs from Wall Street to tiny nonprofits. Most make about \$12 an hour within a year, and many make \$15 an hour in two years, according to school records. Rodriguez, who is 25, makes \$12.72 an hour plus health insurance at Time Warner Cable, where she has been a broadband specialist for a year at a Queens call center.

"What feels great is when I resolve someone's issue," she said after a recent morning of troubleshooting with customers in English and Spanish. "I knew nothing -- I mean freaking nothing -- about computers two years ago, and I just fixed your problem! How cool is that?"

"Sectoral training," as the approach is known, emerged from anti-poverty efforts in a number of communities upended by the loss of manufacturing jobs. Per Scholas's hulking, red-brick training center in the South Bronx was once a factory that printed stock certificates -- until computers rendered its work obsolete. There are now more than 200 sectoral training programs for skills of every level in 41 states. They prepare workers for jobs in industries as diverse as health care, diesel mechanics, information technology and food processing.

Programs in Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore allied with hospitals to train nurses' aides to assume more responsibility, ultimately becoming respiratory therapists, lab technicians and practical nurses. Project Quest in San Antonio trains low-income people in environmental monitoring and aviation mechanics. Per Scholas trains to the computer industry's standard of basic technical competence, the A-Plus certification.

These programs emerged as the federal government was retreating from training -- after years of big spending and disappointing results -- and most have survived on foundation support, particularly the Charles Stewart Mott, Annie E. Casey and Ford foundations. But state support now is increasing because sectoral training fits into many states' approach to economic development. Pennsylvania Gov. Edward G. Rendell (D), is awarding \$15 million to alliances of employers, community colleges, universities and training programs to feed skilled workers into nine industries with potential for rising wages. Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) is considering sectoral-training proposals endorsed by his transition team. And the National Governors Association is urging all governors to embrace the approach.

Per Scholas's \$1.9 million training budget (\$6,000 per student) is funded by grants from foundations and the New York City Council. From 1998 to 2006, the program graduated 1,029 students, of whom 818 got jobs, almost all in the computer field, according to training director Linda Lopez. She said almost 90 percent of those placed in jobs remain at least 12 months. Those who earned further certifications make as much as \$30 an hour, she said.

A study by the Aspen Institute of sectoral programs in the late 1990s found that median annual incomes of graduates rose from \$8,580 before training to \$17,732 after two years of employment. The Mott Foundation is financing a long-term incomes study, hoping the results will persuade the federal government to adopt the model.

The difference from earlier job training, according to Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Paul Osterman, an expert in workforce development, is "the deep understanding these programs develop of the workings of industries where they place people."

The businesslike approach is palpable as soon as students arrive at Per Scholas. "I was late for the orientation, and they told me:

'You're five minutes late. You have to come back another time,' Rodriguez said. Students who miss two classes in the 15-week program are required to leave.

"That's how they teach you -- repetition, repetition, repetition," Rodriguez said. "You must study every night. Everything about you has to be professional -- your voice, your posture." She illustrated by drawing herself up tall, looking suddenly commanding. "They taught me about shaking hands: Look them eye to eye and give a firm handshake -- it shows you're not afraid."

Workforce experts caution that it would take significant investment to replicate sectoral training programs on a grand scale. But the approach is considered promising in part because it has succeeded with people who were hard to employ.

Rodriguez arrived at Per Scholas as a third-generation welfare recipient. A cosmetology dropout from a vocational high school, she recently had passed her GED test and was drawn to Per Scholas in part because every student gets a free computer. Tuition is free, and students must come from low-income communities.

The program is tailored to people who have failed in other jobs or schools. Classes are small, and the teaching style is aggressively hands-on. Students spend the first week not in lectures, but at work benches building their own computers from scratch. Only then are they assigned readings from a text. "Once you've built a computer, you have a vocabulary for it because you've handled it, and the reading -- which is rigorous -- is no longer scary," said Deborah MacFarlane, Per Scholas's first president.

Teachers regularly sabotage students' computers and make them find the problem. "It teaches an inherent part of the occupation: Things always go wrong with technology," MacFarlane said.

Connie Ciliberti, vice president of human resources for Time Warner Cable, said the company eagerly hires Per Scholas graduates as field technicians and on its help desks. "Per Scholas has spent time learning our business, understanding our measures of success," she said.

On a recent day, Rodriguez was one of three Per Scholas alumni working the phones from a cavernous room of cubicles in the Queens call center. Fellow alum Jack Collazo walked by Rodriguez's desk and dropped off two CDs labeled "A-Plus Review." He has passed the A-Plus test; she is still studying for it. He said he burned the CDs for her from his own review discs.

"We look out for each other -- that's another thing we learned at Per Scholas," Collazo said. "You need a network to be successful."

Rodriguez needs one more than most. She has moved off of welfare and Medicaid, but life is hardly easy. She is raising her three sons, ages 2, 3 and 7, and a 2-year-old niece in a three-bedroom, rent-subsidized apartment in the South Bronx. She doesn't have a car, so she has to rise on weekdays at 5 a.m. to get the children washed, dressed and fed and to take her oldest son, Krystian, to a school outside their neighborhood -- a 35-minute bus ride in each direction. Then she takes her 3-year-old, Nathaniel, to day care. Her grandmother, who babysits for the younger children, was sick last week, so Rodriguez had to rise even earlier to take them to the home of an aunt.

"Honestly, there have been times I wanted to quit because I felt so overwhelmed," she said. What stopped her? "I don't want to be stuck again," she said. "I want to be comfortable. I want to live in a house one day. I want my kids to run free in a back yard. It's about providing something for them that I didn't have. We had our first real Christmas tree this year. Krystian opened his present and said: 'Oh, my God. I got what I wanted!'"

She said she doesn't spend much money on herself, but she is a "shoe person," and on her lunch hour, she walks to Payless to look at boots, but not to buy them. She also wants a minivan -- a very used one because she could afford to pay only \$100 a month. With four children to ferry around, she needs the space, but she also loves the suburban imagery. Pretending to slide open the door of an imaginary van, she sang out, "Everybody in!"

Back at the call center, business was brisk. A customer from Manhattan couldn't get a dial tone on his digital phone. Rodriguez ran tests, discovered a problem in the modem and scheduled a technician. A caller from Flushing fumed that he couldn't get online to place orders for a Chinese New Year celebration. "I do apologize, sir. Please bear with me while I run some diagnostics on your modem," she said solicitously, in her Per Scholas-trained voice. She identified a problem with his Internet protocol address and sent his call to a higher-level specialist.

"I sometimes get home and all I can think is, 'I had such a long day,'" she said. "But then I think about having a nice check at the end of the week and taking my kids to a movie. I know they're going to be able to say, 'Mom did a lot.' So I hope they'll grow up to take care of me when I give out."