

EVALUATION OF NEW HAMPSHIRE WIOA ASSESSMENTS

Process, Content and Recommendations

Submitted to Southern New Hampshire Services and the New Hampshire
Office of Workforce Opportunity

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I. INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a key part of workforce development programming. Career counselors (Career Navigators in New Hampshire) can use assessment practices to determine people’s readiness for services, their ability to engage in programming, and the course of action most appropriate for someone with their interests and skills ^[1]. The Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the federal legislation guiding public workforce development programming, encourages assessment as part of program practice.

As one of ten states with a single Workforce Investment Board (WIB), New Hampshire employs universal assessment practices across its twelve New Hampshire Works Centers. In 2002, the New Hampshire WIB instituted the requirement that everyone using funds allocated through WIOA and its predecessor the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) take a package of three short assessments, in reading, math and career interest. This practice has remained unchanged since then.

In 2016, New Hampshire’s Office of Workforce Opportunity, in partnership with Southern New Hampshire Services (SNHS), contracted with Brandeis University’s Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP) to conduct an evaluation of the WIOA program’s assessment tools and practices. This research has three primary aims:

1. Identify the particular assessment tools currently in use in New Hampshire, the skills and abilities that those tools measure, and the procedures by which they are administered.
2. Examine the extent to which assessment results relate to and/or inform Career Navigators’ broader work with participants.
3. Solicit feedback and provide recommendations for changing assessment practices to develop a more relevant and useful skills assessment procedure.

This evaluation draws on data from multiple sources, including participant and career counselor perspectives, to

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Process:

- Utilize a strengths-based, personalized approach
- Improve assessment environment

Content:

- Develop higher-level and sector-specific tools
- Update tools and link to labor market information
- Consider developing a website or web-based platform

Staff and Partner Engagement:

- Provide initial and ongoing staff training
- Deepen partnerships

examine the strengths and weaknesses of the program's current assessment procedures. We then offer recommendations to strengthen and improve the assessment process and program outcomes.

II. BACKGROUND

A. What do Assessments

Assess?

Assessing job seekers for interests and skills is a key part of career counseling services ^[1]. Career counselors need to understand what people can and want to do in order to help them identify a career path that they will stay with and succeed in

over time. Broadly speaking, assessments are useful to determine people's abilities and interests in three areas: academic ability, occupation-specific skills, and career interests.

Three areas of assessment:

- Academic assessment
- Occupation-specific assessment
- Interest inventory

In addition, some tools attempt to assess people's soft skills, though these are notoriously difficult to assess. In theory, job seekers can utilize the knowledge gained from these different types of assessments to identify their strengths, formulate a career plan, further their education, and enter or re-enter the workforce. Assessment can also be viewed as an ongoing process of guided self-reflection over a person's career that leads to increasingly satisfying, productive, and meaningful work.

In reality, the assessment process is not as straightforward as it may seem. Employers seek employees with a variety of technical, cognitive and soft skills. Career counselors face the difficult task of identifying which among these three sets of skills participants have, how their skills may translate in different employment settings, and how to help them build skills over time for occupational success.

Skills, however, are hard to define. The tasks of defining and measuring skills have challenged social scientists for decades ^[2]. The field of psychology dominates the current career assessment literature ^[1], based on the idea that certain personality types are better suited for certain jobs. Yet WIOA participants often seek careers based on a broader set of factors including availability of jobs, alignment with personal and family scheduling needs, perceived or real abilities, positive or negative experiences in past jobs, time required in training, and more. WIOA administrators across the United States are increasingly modifying and updating their assessment practices to align with the priorities and needs of their participants as well as the specific skills required by employers.

Workforce development programs can benefit from recognizing and responding to these challenges and complexities described in this section. Assessments have the potential to be extremely helpful to career counselors. Validated tools can give career counselors an unbiased perspective on participants, and in the process, might help to reveal any existing biases that career counselors might unknowingly have. At the same time, because they seem scientific, assessments can give the illusion that the results are hard and fast facts about people.

In reality, innumerable external factors often influence the assessment-taking process to produce results that do not accurately represent people and are not necessarily predictive of success in the workplace. For example, using assessments of emotional intelligence or soft skills can have the effect of making some people appear less work-ready than they really are. In some cases, the assessment process can be cumbersome, frustrating, or irrelevant.

We recognize, therefore, that assessments can do as much harm as good. The goal of any program with regards to assessments should be to gather as much information as possible while minimizing harm and empowering people to identify appropriate opportunities for their future. Assessments may be viewed as one tool available to participants and career counselors to strengthen their collective knowledge, relationship, and to aid the overall career counseling process.

The goal of any program with regards to assessments should be to gather as much information as possible while minimizing harm and empowering people to identify appropriate opportunities for their future.

B. WIOA Policy

Federal WIOA policy requires that employment service programs conduct some type of assessment with customers, and use this assessment to inform the career counseling plan. Career services should include “initial assessment of skill levels (including literacy, numeracy, and English language proficiency), aptitudes, abilities (including skills gaps), and supportive service needs”^[3].

State and local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) have discretion as to how local career counselors should assess job seekers. New Hampshire’s WIOA plan specifies the purpose of assessment is to determine what exactly the customer needs, including services, career counseling and/or training, to enter employment:

The purpose of assessment is intended to ascertain which services (basic career, individualized career and/or training) the customer needs to reenter the labor market. If training is determined to be needed and desirable, then the goal of assessment should be to ascertain the customer’s appropriateness for his/her occupational goal and ability to benefit from training services ^[4].

Current New Hampshire WIOA assessment policy identifies three stages of assessment: initial, comprehensive, and ongoing. Each stage offers data useful to developing the individual employment plan.

- **Initial assessments** provide the basis for first impressions and ideas of what a customer’s employment related needs might be. These tend to be more informal and observational in nature. (Behavioral observation, interviews, informational interviews, etc.)
- **Comprehensive assessments** provide more detailed specific information about the customer. They are usually structured, formal testing instruments that provide a score or feedback about the level of a customer’s expertise or compatibility in certain areas. (Job Corps Reading Screening Test, Brigance Math Test, O*Net Interest Inventory, etc.)
- **On-going assessment** can be comprised of all the phases of assessment. Career Navigators need to assess the customer continually as they progress through WIOA services. This will ensure that all barriers will be addressed and that customers receive the support and guidance necessary to reach their occupational goal. The process of assessment and the building of the assessment screen in eTEAMS provide the framework and background for establishing the customer’s IEP (Individual Employment Plan). (Interviews, Informational Interviews, Job Shadowing, Employment Search, etc) ^[4]

Three stages of assessment:

- Initial
- Comprehensive
- Ongoing

In addition, New Hampshire policy specifies that the assessment process be the “least intrusive and most efficient possible to achieve the desired objective.” ^[4]

C. Perspectives on Assessments from Other States

As part of this study, we reviewed the procedures used by other states that operate under a single WIB structure and conducted a conference call to facilitate a dialogue about assessments.ⁱ Assessment results are used in different ways across different states. While states agree that assessment results should orient the course of service provided by the career counselor, WIB leaders emphasized different applications of assessment results in their state programs. In North Dakota, assessment results are used to make sure that participants will succeed in whatever training in which they hope to enroll. In Alaska, assessment results reveal skills gaps – suggesting that assessment results might be used to identify appropriate training, rather than confirm that a pre-selected training is an

ⁱ There are 10 states that operate under a single WIB. Five states responded to our request for information. Findings from this call are presented throughout this report in appropriate sections. See methods for detail.

appropriate fit for the participant. Representatives from Utah emphasized that assessment results constitute the basis of the employment plan.

Both Utah and Alaska articulated the importance of sharing assessment results with participants. Utah emphasized that participants should receive copies of everything, not only in the interest of transparency but also because results and information gathered in the assessment process should be relevant to them. Utah WIOA programs include a budget in the assessment process, as well as a referral list of local resources for participants who need additional support. In Alaska, participants receive copies of their assessment results so that the employment plan can be co-created by both participant and career counselor. A WIB leader from Alaska said that, ideally, the WIOA program should feel like a partnership, and participants should feel ownership of the process.

III. CURRENT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

A. Required Assessments

All individuals who receive WIOA program services in New Hampshire are required to complete at minimum a panel of three skills assessments which measure basic math ability, reading comprehension, and evaluate work interests. The required assessments are as follows:

1. **Brigance Math Test:** A 28-item math assessment that asks test-takers to solve addition, subtraction, multiplication and division problems (with whole numbers, fractions, and U.S. currency), as well as standard system unit conversions (pounds to ounces, feet to inches). Calculators are not allowed, and test-takers must complete computations by hand. Scores reflect grade level proficiency, from K.5 through grade 9.0.
2. **Job Corps Reading Screening Test:** A 27-item reading comprehension assessment that asks test-takers to complete sentences in a series of short paragraphs by filling in missing words. Questions are multiple choice, and progress in difficulty as test-takers move through the test. Scores reflect grade level proficiency, from grade 4.1 through grade 10.1.
3. **O*NET Interest Profiler:** An interest inventory that measures test-takers' level of affinity in the following six categories of work: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. Upon completion of the inventory of questions, O*NET generates a letter code that reflects test-takers' highest-scoring interest areas, and asks test-takers to select a "Job Zone." There are 5 "Job Zones," which correspond with different levels of education, experience, and skill. Based on test-takers' three highest-scoring interest areas and selected "Job Zone," O*NET generates a list of occupations that match an individual's interest

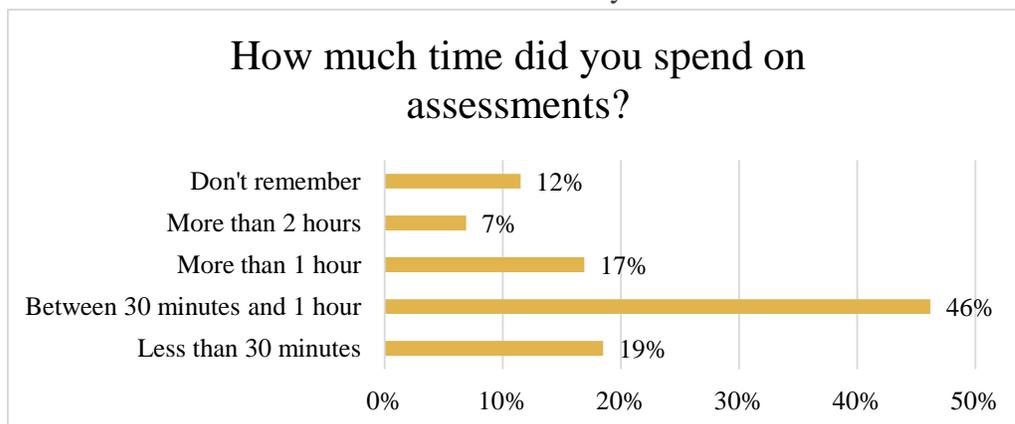
profile and job-preparedness. O*NET also provides information about the “industry outlook” for each occupation, indicating whether or not a field is growing and if employment opportunities might be readily available. There are two versions of the O*NET Interest Profiler, a 60-item short form version available on MyNextMove.org, as well as a 180-item long form version, downloadable for Windows. Career Navigators use both versions, depending on what’s available at their office location.

B. The Assessment Process

All required assessments are administered as part of the WIOA program intake process. Participants are typically asked to complete the assessments during their first or second appointment with a Career Navigator, after the Navigator has verified the participant’s income, collected demographic information, and gathered details regarding the participant’s unemployment or dislocation from work (i.e. date of lay-off, permanency of the lay-off). There is considerable variability in when and how assessments are administered, depending on individual Career Navigators’ preference, schedule, and capacity.

When possible, Career Navigators provide participants with a semi-private workspace (an empty cubicle, for example) in which to complete the Brigance Math and Job Corps Reading Screening tests, both of which are administered on paper. The O*NET Interest Profiler is taken on the computer, and is typically completed in the participant computer workspace within the NH Works office (which is shared amongst participants of NHES and any other programs co-located with WIOA).

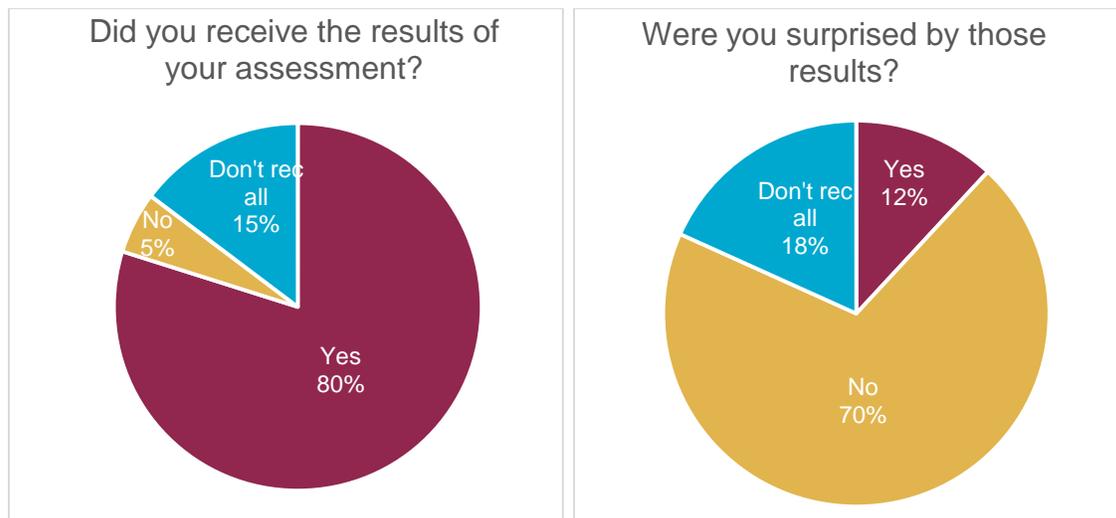
None of the required assessments are timed, so participants may take as much or as little time as they need to complete each test. Among those interviewed by the research team, Career Navigators and WIOA participants alike indicated that the assessment process typically takes anywhere from approximately 15 minutes to 1 hour. This data point is corroborated by survey data: close to half of survey respondents (46%) report spending between half an hour and one hour on the survey.



C. Scoring and Implications of Assessment Results

1. Math & Reading Assessments

Career Navigators score the Brigance Math and Job Corps Reading Screening tests by hand and deliver the results to participants. There is not a uniform way in which assessment results are reviewed, and Navigators make an effort to provide as much or as little detail as participants request and/or are comfortable with. Some Navigators score the assessments while participants are present, and others do so privately. Over three-quarters of survey respondents (80%) report having received the results of their assessment tests. Most (70%) were not surprised by their assessment results, and only 12% report feeling surprised by the results.



Scores at or below the eighth-grade level on either the Brigance Math or Job Corps Reading Screening assessments indicate what the federal policy defines as a “basic skills deficiency.”ⁱⁱ If participants score above the “basic skills deficiency” threshold, Navigator-led conversations about their results are typically brief and recorded quickly in the file. Participants who are identified as “basic skills deficient” are eligible for WIOA services regardless of their income level. In this case, even those individuals with incomes that would otherwise be too high to qualify for the program become eligible if they demonstrate a lack of “basic skill” in math and reading.

When participants receive scores that indicate a “basic skills deficiency,” Career Navigators offer information and referrals to various resources for support, including in-person adult learning courses offered at no-cost in the NH Works office itself, HiSET (previously called the GED or General Equivalency Exam) preparation for participants who have not completed high school, and Kahn Academy for free online learning. Depending on the type of training a participant is interested in attending, Career

ⁱⁱ See recommendations section for a discussion of this terminology.

Navigators may encourage participation in an adult learning course and/or completion of the HiSET before releasing WIOA funds for further occupation-specific training.

2. Work Interest Profiler

Career Navigators also review the results of the O*NET Interest Profiler assessment with participants, typically explaining that they are looking for a match between participant interests (as identified by the O*NET inventory) and training and career plan. Ideally, a participant's O*NET interest code will indicate their career plan/target occupations are a good fit, and the O*NET industry forecast will indicate that the field is hiring. For participants who are unsure about what kind of work they'd like to pursue, Career Navigators utilize the O*NET results to discuss different career options with participants. O*NET Interest Profiler results are recorded in the participant file, and used to support requests for training dollars.

D. Optional Assessments

The New Hampshire WIOA program also has access to two optional participant assessment tools. These appear to be used relatively infrequently by Career Navigators, and not all Navigators have received training on how to administer them, and/or been granted access to the tools. Only 10% of survey respondents report having taken these tests. The optional assessments are as follows:

1. **TORQ:** The TORQ assessment uses an algorithm to estimate the ease or difficulty with which a job seeker might target a new career, based on the job seeker's previous work experience. Participants enter their previous job titles, dates of employment, and wage in the TORQ platform, from which TORQ builds a list of potential occupations to suggest to job seekers. Each occupation is given a score to indicate how much (if any) additional training and/or other preparation the job seeker might need in order to obtain employment in the selected field. TORQ also pulls job postings from external job boards (Indeed, Career Builder, and US Jobs) to confirm the skills required for selected occupations and to measure the availability of work in a given field.
2. **ProveIt:** ProveIt assessments validate test-takers' level of proficiency across a range of specific skills. ProveIt offers more than 800 different assessments for soft skills, computer skills, math, writing, and grammar. New Hampshire's WIOA program appears to most commonly use ProveIt assessments to measure participants' proficiency across a range of software applications, including programs in the Microsoft Office suite (Excel and Word, most frequently), Quickbooks, Salesforce, and other popular computer-based business tools. ProveIt tests are unique to the selected application. The ProveIt interface simulates the selected program, and asks test-takers to perform tasks within that program at a progressive level of difficulty, mimicking the ways in which the software is used

in the workplace. ProveIt scores reflect test-takers level of proficiency in the given application.

TORQ and ProveIt are computer-based tools that can be completed either in the NH Works Office with the Career Navigator present, or by the participant alone using a personal computer. ProveIt assessments can be lengthy, and so participants are typically entered into, and given log-in credentials for, the ProveIt system during an appointment with a Navigator, but asked to complete the assessment at home. TORQ also generates an individual log-in for those that use the assessment, so participants can refer back to the information produced and job postings provided. Career Navigators can see participant activity in the TORQ system, and it appears – at least per the data available to one Navigator in Nashua – that participants rarely return to TORQ after the initial performance of the assessment.

Career Navigators can use the results of the TORQ assessment to discuss participants' skills gaps and to identify transferable skills. ProveIt can be used when a participant is unsure whether or not they should include a technical skill– like Excel proficiency – on their resume. ProveIt can also be useful to identify holes in the skill set, and to see if a particular technical training would be useful. If a test-taker receives a low score on a ProveIt assessment, that score may help to justify a request for training dollars. If a test-taker receives a high score, that score can help to validate skill and boost participant confidence.

In addition to their use in the WIOA program, ProveIt assessments are used by some staffing agencies and Human Resources departments in New Hampshire (as well as across the U.S). ProveIt assessments are used to test job seekers' skills, so that only qualified applicants are directed to and/or hired for open positions. It's possible that a ProveIt score report might be recognized by potential employers and support participants' job applications.

While most Career Navigators have access to the TORQ system, it appears that very few Navigators have received training on and access to the ProveIt tool. Career Navigators largely only perform the three required assessments with participants, and rarely incorporate either TORQ or ProveIt in the assessment procedure.

E. Key Findings

New Hampshire's WIOA assessment procedures were designed for consistency and quality, and reflect an understanding of the most important dimensions of assessment. However, this evaluation revealed challenges in implementation and practice. These challenges are not unique to New Hampshire and can likely be reduced by updating policies, procedures, and practice to reflect the diversity of WIOA participant needs, strengths, and occupational paths. Two key challenges are highlighted here.

1. Diverse Pathways and Generic Assessments

Participants tend to learn about WIOA through New Hampshire Employment Security (the unemployment program), Job Club, other service and training providers, through their personal networks. Sometimes it is a combination of resources and referrals that lead them to WIOA. The participants that we interviewed largely came through employment security, although this could be due to the fact that our interview sample was largely comprised of dislocated workers. One participant states in an interview, “It was a connection of several different resources that led me here to the WIOA program.”

Regardless of how they learn about WIOA, the participant population is diverse and reflects a wide range of work experience, language proficiency, income, skill level, and career stage. The only uniting factor among this population is a desire to further their employment options and career by accessing further training. We identified 6 main participant pathways that reflect the stage people are at in their career.ⁱⁱⁱ Each of the pathways has different implications for the assessment process, illustrating the fact that a “one size fits all” assessment process is inadequate and inefficient. See Figure 1 below.

A. Expedited Referrals

The “expedited referral” enters the WIOA program with a training or job opportunity already identified, and requires little to no assessment. These referrals respond to employers’ urgent need for workers, and are more common during periods of low unemployment. As illustrated in the following quote, current expedited referral participants take the required assessments, but they do not inform their career path.

The class that I wanted to take, because it was a weekend class, which they only offer a few every once in a while. So, they got me in quickly and...I had I think two appointments with them. The initial appointment, and then I had to bring a couple of documents back I think, and take a test, or something like that.

[Participant Interview]

In addition to those who come to WIOA with a training opportunity already identified, another subset of WIOA participants enter WIOA with an On-the-Job Training (OJT) opportunity already approved. In this case, Career Navigators are asked to complete the assessment process to justify the use of WIOA training funds, yet do not typically engage participants in career counseling. If the assessment process changes in the future, these participants could potentially skip the assessment process altogether or take an expedited version of assessments to allow Career Navigators to focus more time and energy on assessments for those on other pathways.

ⁱⁱⁱ Note: these categories may overlap and are meant to inform a more personalized assessment process, rather than to question eligibility guidelines or categories.

Expedited Referrals

- Pre-Identified Training:
- Enters WIOA already accepted into training
- Little or no need for assessment
- May benefit from career counseling but may not be a priority

- On-the-Job Training:
- Already accepted into a job in which training is provided
- Little or no need for assessment
- May benefit from career counseling but may not be a priority

Career Changer

- Comes to WIOA with experience and depth in a specific job or career
- Is interested in changing careers but is unsure of training needed
- Assessment should focus on academic and occupational skills and interest areas
- May benefit from in-depth sector-specific career counseling re: labor market opportunities, transferable skills, fit between skills and training options

Dislocated Worker

- Comes to WIOA with sector specific experience or workplace specific skills
- May need to validate existing skills
- Assessment should focus on occupational skills and may require guidance from someone with in-depth knowledge of sector such as an industry mentor
- May benefit from sector-specific career counseling re: change in career path, new options, what training is best fit, etc.

Low Education

- Comes to WIOA with limited work experience, education, and training
- Assessment should include academic and occupational skills and interest areas
- May benefit from in-depth career counseling re: addressing barriers, labor market opportunities, fit between skills and training options

Low-Income

- Comes to WIOA with a range of work experience, education, and training
- May or may not fit into several of the other categories
- Assessment should focus on interest inventory, and occupational skills, and if limited education, academic skills
- May benefit from in-depth career counseling re: addressing barriers, labor market opportunities, fit between skills and training options

Limited English Proficient

- Comes to WIOA with limited English
- May have credentials or experience from another country
- Assessment should include referral to ESOL testing from DOE to determine ESL level, evaluation of credentials, academic and occupational skills, and interest areas
- May benefit from career counseling re: how to translate skills in NH context

B. Career Changers

Career changers, unlike expedited referrals, come to WIOA knowing that they want a change. Some participants bring a depth of experience in a specific job, and could benefit from in-depth assessments and career counseling to determine how to best align their skills and interests with jobs that are in-demand. WIOA Career Navigators, understandably, do not always have the industry-specific depth required to support these participants. The O*NET interest inventory can be particularly useful for these participants.

C. Dislocated Workers

Dislocated workers also come to WIOA with a depth of experience in a specific job or field, but are not always interested in making a career change. Instead, they are often seeking guidance in deepening or updating their skills in their current industry sector. For example, one IT professional sought guidance from WIOA in upgrading his skills after he lost his job working in operating system support. Although he was grateful for the tuition assistance offered by WIOA, he struggled to identify the best fit for a training course that would upgrade his skills and help him re-enter the workforce. Finally, he identified an IT networking group, and found the specific guidance he needed there. Other types of work that dislocated workers had done in the past include 3D modeling, electromechanical engineering, arborist, medical imaging, telecommunications, and real estate.

Career changers and dislocated workers alike felt that the WIOA program was not oriented towards their needs or level of experience. They were seeking specific guidance about higher level positions and struggled to find the support they needed.

I was in there talking to the people, going to their meetings that they were having about, you know, like what's the re-training that's available. But most of the re-training that's available is for, I don't want to say menial jobs, but they're all for, sort of hands-on jobs.

[Participant Interview]

D. Low Education

In contrast to these seasoned professionals, some participants enter WIOA with little or no work experience or formal education. Career Navigators currently identify participants as “basic skills deficient” based on the results of their math and reading tests. Then they typically encourage participants to pursue further general education before entering an approved training program. It was unclear from our study to what extent WIOA Career Navigators engage in career counseling with these participants. In many cases, further general education is an appropriate recommendation. However, based on skills and interests, some people may choose not to pursue formal education and instead

may pursue a career that builds on other strengths. These participants may benefit from in-depth career counseling or referrals to OJTs.

E. Low-Income

Participants who are eligible for WIOA due to their income level (low-income category) may fit into this or one of the other categories. In general, in-depth assessments and career counseling are appropriate for this population. NH WIOA staff noted that since the Recession, it is not uncommon to see highly educated participants, some of whom were dislocated workers, accessing public assistance for the first time. In other words, low-income does not always suggest low levels of education or work experience. If a participant has a bachelor's or master's degree, it is likely inappropriate to administer the basic math and reading tests, and instead assessments could focus on interests, strengths, and specific occupational skills.

F. Limited English Proficient

Finally, the WIOA program serves an increasing number of individuals with limited English proficiency. Current NH WIOA operational procedures state that it is up to the discretion of the Career Navigator whether limited English speakers will be administered the three required assessments. Procedures are outlined as follows:

Use of other testing instruments such as the BEST Test can be discussed with the Program Manager if necessary and Basic Skills Services can be considered to help the customer. If the Navigator determines that administering the Reading and Math Tests is inappropriate, notes must be added to the assessment summary explaining the situation. This will in no way limit or exclude the customer from participating in any WIOA services”^[4].

In addition to following these current procedures, it is critical for Career Navigators to view limited English speakers as individuals that have a wide range of skills. English language skills are important, but not absolutely necessary for succeeding in the workplace in New Hampshire. Many immigrants learn English best while on a job, quickly incorporating vocabulary specific to their industry sector as they go. Although these individuals may not be able to benefit from WIOA-approved training programs, they could benefit from focused career counseling. Assessments should include English language proficiency, the translation of foreign credentials and experience, and a determination of how the skills that foreign-born professionals bring with them may translate into the New Hampshire labor market. Feedback from members of the Office of Workforce Opportunity Interagency Director's Group indicated that WIOA may benefit from establishing a stronger partnership with the Department of Education to systematically access these resources.

Other states are experimenting with a participant-driven assessment process that is tailored to individual needs. In Alaska, Career Navigators have access to multiple assessments of each type, and have the freedom to select the most appropriate tool(s) for individual participants. Similarly, in Montana, while all WIOA participants are required to complete the TABE

“I barely remember [taking the assessments], but I must have done it. I had to do everything they said to do, you know?”
[Participant Interview]

and the Montana Career Information System Assessment, Career Navigators are able to select the most appropriate additional assessment tools depending on individual participant needs.

This means that assessment procedures in Alaska and Montana are not standardized across all WIOA participants, but rather tailored to the needs and abilities of the individual (to the extent possible within the scope of available assessment tools). While Utah WIOA programs prescribe a standard assessment procedure for all participants (like New Hampshire), representatives from Utah also articulated the importance of foregrounding individual participant needs and allowing those needs to drive the assessment process (and the course of service following assessment).

2. Like Checking a Box

Because the “one size fits all” process does not adequately inform career counseling, participants describe the process as feeling more like checking a box. Some participants remembered taking each assessment, while others remember little about the assessment process or tools. Most participants described the process as just something that had to be done as part of their larger eligibility/intake process. One states, “I barely remember that, but I must have done it. I had to do everything they said to do, you know?”

Among survey respondents, the math test stands out as the most memorable: 70% report having taken the math test. (Slightly more than this – 73.5% -- remember taking some form of paper test.) Less than two-thirds of survey respondents (69%) report having taken the reading test, and 58% of survey respondents report having taken the O*NET Interest Profiler, though only 49.3% recall taking a test on the computer during the assessment process, so it is possible that some took the O*NET Interest Profiler elsewhere.

Although not entirely clear on the point of the math and reading tests at the time, many respondents accepted them with ambivalence as part of a required process. Most people described the math and reading tests in neutral terms such as “easy” “fine” or “pretty

basic.” By and large, this experience is familiar to anyone who has participated in or worked for a bureaucratic program in which the steps are laid out and rarely questioned. In the case of WIOA, this includes doing whatever is required in order to get access to thousands of dollars in training funds.

I think one was Math and English. It was all done online and we didn't really discuss it all that much as I recall. There was no real issues about it, but I guess it was just... a square that they had to fill to find out if you maybe needed some more basic training in reading, writing, basic math, that type of thing.

[Participant Interview]

I thought they were pretty standard. I didn't, I wouldn't necessarily say they were helpful. But, I understand why they did that. Yeah, the math and reading she didn't really explain the purpose of that. She just, kind of told me it was standard practice for them.

[Participant Interview]

Career Navigators expressed frustration with the assessments, citing examples where participants were insulted by or “dread them.” They felt that participants don't understand why they have to take them, and do not really get anything out of the assessment process. Instead, they just do it because they need access to WIOA funds.

Yeah and I try and explain why [the reasoning behind the assessments]. I tell them that we're just trying to basically paint a picture of who they are so that when our coordinator looks on the computer they can kind of get to know the person. You know? And if they score very badly in the math, we may want to look at additional training... If we're putting them into accounting or something, you know? They sometimes grumble a little bit. Most people are just like, "Whatever.... Just let me do what I got to do..."

[Staff Focus Group]

Navigators sometimes offer the math and reading tests to participants who would be ineligible otherwise due to being slightly over income. If they test low, they can be categorized as “basic skills deficient” and can receive WIOA services regardless of income. In this way, these assessments are used as a creative loophole to extend WIOA services to more people who can benefit from them.

Staff 1: For me, usually, it's second meeting if they're over income slightly and if we have space I will do it before we've even done the enrollment to see if they're basic skills efficient.

Staff 2: Because it that could make them eligible depending on how they do.

Staff 1: If they're not on unemployment benefits or they're over income, that's the only other way that we can bring them in.

[Staff Focus Group]

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEW HAMPSHIRE WIOA PROGRAM

In a small state like New Hampshire that operates the WIOA program using a single WIB model, there are both opportunities and challenges in implementing recommendations for program improvement. The following recommendations emerge from analysis of data collected for this report. We offer these recommendations with the understanding that

The assessment process could respond to the different strengths and needs of different participants if Career Navigators had a *menu* of different assessment tools from which to choose which are most appropriate for each group.

some are short-term and require small administrative changes, while others may be long-term and could require greater investment of time and resources.

Recommendations are related to the assessment process, the content of assessment tools, and the engagement of stakeholders in assessment and the larger service package.

A. Process-Related Recommendations

We recommend the following to improve the assessment process in order both to yield more useful information out of the assessments and to make the experience of taking the assessments more pleasant for participants.

1. Utilize a strengths-based, personalized approach

As illustrated above, the WIOA population comes to the program from multiple paths and brings different strengths to the workplace, and these diverse paths should end in assessments that identify each participant's assets and meet each participant's specific needs. The current assessment process does not adequately highlight the diverse strengths that participants bring or differentiate between these different participant pathways. The assessment process could respond to the different capabilities and needs of participants if Career Navigators had a *menu* of different assessment tools from which to choose which are most appropriate for each group.

In responding to these different pathways, it is important to use language that highlights participants' strengths and is sensitive to different levels of need. For example, framing low math and reading test scores as a "basic skills deficiency" has a number of implications for WIOA participants. Aside from potentially serving as a reminder of negative school experiences, a focus on participants' deficits does not facilitate empowerment, and can obscure participants' unique capabilities and skills. A strengths-

based approach ^[6] would seek instead to identify a person's strengths and other positive resources which can serve as a foundation for growth and change.

Some interview respondents were also offended by the simple nature of the assessments and pointed out that they were "a waste of time," or for "people with a lower skillset." Survey respondents also mentioned this phenomenon. One stated, "These assessment tests were at a 6th grade level at best. I have a Masters degree and it was actually insulting that I would need to take a test such as this to move forward with WIOA." Another wrote, "They are not geared toward people who have been working. Felt more like High School testing."

For other participants, having to take a test brought out feelings of nervousness, insecurity and inadequacy in skill areas that they hadn't worked with since high school.

They reminded me how horrible I was at those in high schools and how horrible I still am at them going oh boy. They weren't hard. But then there other ones that because of my education and my abilities that were not difficult.

[Participant Interview]

Unstructured conversations with Career Navigators can also provide a more individualized means to assess participants. For some participants, these conversations were the most memorable part of the process. They recalled the conversations and relationship that they built with their Career Navigator in the first few meetings, and were fairly sure that the counselor's assessment of them and their skills was based on these conversations in which they went over work history.

We discussed it. It wasn't anything that I did on the computer, it's what she had. You know, we were verbally talking about as she was filling it in on the program.

[Participant Interview]

Career Navigators also point to the importance of these conversations. When asked how they get the most valuable information from participants, Career Navigators noted that they learn about the person through a conversation about their work history and the situation that has inspired them to seek support.

Interviewer: How do you feel like you get the most useful information about people?

Staff 1: Talking to them.

Staff 2: Talking about their employment history.

Staff 3: Mmhmm. Yeah. You can get a lot out of the employment history... When they first come in, just hearing their story, you know? 'I got laid off from this job. I was there twenty years.' You kinda get to know where the person's at.

[Staff Focus Group]

Other states have different ways of handling these unstructured yet critical interpersonal relationship-building aspects of the assessment process. In addition to administering a range of codified assessment tools, some states validated the idea that skills assessment also occurs in both structured activities and unstructured conversation between participants and Career Navigators. In Alaska, Career Navigators perform a “participant objective interview” to assess personal circumstances, employability skills, and work experience. In Utah and North Dakota, the assessment conversation is structured by prompts/tabs within the participant intake and information system that solicit information about a participant’s work experience and career goals, level of education, and household situation (including level of income and finances, housing status, and family needs). This conversation also functions as a barrier screening (touching on criminal background, access to transportation, and disability). These Navigator-led conversations appear to complement raw scores generated by assessment tools with details about participants’ unique personal/family situations which shape their career goals.

Career Navigators in Utah aim to understand the situation of the whole family in the assessment interview, using a two-generation approach.

Utah, in particular, is invested in this assessment interview as a means with which to understand the needs of the whole person/family. Career Navigators in Utah aim to understand the situation of the whole family in the interview, using a two-generation approach. In Utah, participants are asked about access to transportation and childcare, outstanding physical and mental health needs, and screened for substance misuse and domestic violence. Barriers identified by the participant prompt referrals to resources outside of the WIOA program, and may trigger further assessment.

Other states validated the idea that skills assessment also occurs in both structured activities and unstructured conversation between participants and Career Navigators.

One important caution about the conversational approach to assessment is that it should not be completely unstructured, or replace the use of validated tools where appropriate. This would place too much discretion in the hands of Career Navigators, who like all people have unconscious biases that affect decision-making and service provision. When asked what they wished they could assess more easily, Career Navigators wished there was a way to know if participants are going to be committed to WIOA program and if they will continue to follow up with their Navigator throughout the course of service.

Interviewer: What else? What would you like to be able to tell about them in the very beginning?

Staff 1: Whether they're gonna be a good worker and actually complete what they're supposed to do.

Staff 2: That we will never know.

[Staff Focus Group]

Career Navigators are sometimes judged by the success of their participants, and WIOA programs must report outcomes regularly to the federal government to prove they are making the best possible use of funds. So it is inevitable that programs seek to establish a balance between assisting those who need it while achieving success so the program can

continue. The problem arises when Career Navigators have preconceived notions or particular ideas about who is most likely to be a “good worker” and follow through. Navigators expressed concern that people who are homeless and those who have survived domestic and sexual abuse may not follow through. These

A completely unstructured assessment would place too much discretion in the hands of Career Navigators who, like all people, have unconscious biases that affect decision-making and service provision.

concerns appear to make Navigators hesitant to work with community members with high barriers.

We just had a woman come in from ... an agency that works with people from domestic and sexual abuse, and she would like to learn about services to partner with [us] but you worry... about the people that ...she may send to you... They're in a safe house but she'd like to get them out into the community more but, then again, if you bring them on, are they gonna stay in the area or are they just gonna get up and leave?

[Staff Focus Group]

These are just a few examples of biases that can exist within the assessment process. Others include biases by gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability, and level of education. Staff training and providing the explanation behind policies and procedures are two ways to reduce bias and ensure greater equity in assessments and service provision.

New Hampshire is not alone in its challenges with assessment. Several states acknowledged that there are gaps in their current assessment procedures. North Dakota expressed that they struggle to accurately measure “aptitude,” Alaska mentioned that it remains a challenge to assess soft skills. While soft skill is a “hugely broad area,” the representative from Alaska said that soft skills are critical to career planning and occupational success, and wished that there were better tools available to measure and develop soft skills.

2. Improve assessment environment and streamline timing of services

Assessments are done very soon after entry into WIOA, and participants can form impressions about the program based on their early experience. The test-taking

Helping staff to understand how to use assessments and why they are important can help to reduce bias and improve equity in service provision.

environment is memorable to participants and, therefore, important to consider. Almost one in five survey respondents (17%) suggest improvements in the space and/or scheduling when asked what could be changed in the WIOA program, indicating that this method of administering

assessments might not be optimal for participants. In particular, a handful of respondents requested more privacy. Also, the practice of Career Navigators scoring assessments in front of participants can generate unnecessary anxiety or shame.

Several participants expressed frustration that it took them a few weeks or months before they were able to meet with a

Several states struggle to determine the best assessment package because concepts such as aptitude and skill (and, in particular, soft skills) are vague and difficult to define.

counselor for their first appointment. This was especially challenging if they were seeking to start a specific training program on the academic calendar, and then were asked to engage in a lengthy eligibility, assessment, and intake process.

The only bad thing I can say ... they had given me a date [for my first appointment] well into that first semester.... I did all the other course work, the

Work Ready New Hampshire, and they're saying, oh no. we'll see you in mid-September... I made a stink... and I got in... and there were other people who had gone through mid-September, and you know...It was definitely not fair and not right. [Interview 2]

There was still a lot of paperwork I had to do. And a lot of time that I don't know why we didn't start it back in October. [Interview 15]

Large caseloads and lengthy processes create a backlog for Career Navigators, who cannot always meet participants within their preferred timeframe. This can create a hostile relationship between Career Navigators and participants before they even begin working together.

People are getting pretty nasty because I'm having to book out. I mean, this just happened yesterday when someone was just so annoyed that he had to wait a month to see me and then possibly wait another month to come in for the follow-up appointment. But, it's like, I'm one person. [Focus Group 2]

On the other hand, at times Career Navigators are asked to complete an “expedited assessment” process for On-the-Job Training (OJT) participants. In these cases, employers receive reimbursement for conducting specific job training in the workplace, and participants sometimes end up completing WIOA paperwork after they have already been offered the job. In this situation, assessments were considered by both counselors and participants as something largely unnecessary that must be checked off in order to complete eligibility paperwork for training.

Below, we recommend exploring a web-based platform to streamline the assessment process. Using web-based tools, participants could complete the assessments in a range of environments, including their own home, and at the appropriate time. In addition, web-based tools eliminate the need for Career Navigators to score the tests. Ideally, a web-based system would reduce inefficient processes for both Career Navigators and participants while producing valuable information to guide career counseling and training decisions.

B. Content-Related Recommendations

3. Develop higher-level and sector-specific tools

The current assessment tools collect a baseline of academic performance and general information on work interests. These tools can be useful in determining eligibility for training, but are often too rough to provide information that can actually be useful to the career planning process. When participants were asked what would improve the assessment process, one of the most common suggestions (14%) was to make it more thorough and personalized. One survey respondent stated, “The assessment tool was

more perfunctory than useful. The counselor could have made it more relevant but did not how to relate to my interests or needs.” Another wrote, “Some of the assessment tools were very basic (i.e. reading and math). Perhaps tailoring the tests to type of job desired (i.e. blue collar, white collar) [would improve the process].”

Higher-level and sector-specific assessments can provide a more refined view of participants and their potential career options within their identified target industry sector. Currently, Prove-It or TORQ are available to fill this role. However, our research shows that they are underutilized and Career Navigators lack sufficient training or time to be able to use them to their fullest potential. An alternative to developing this package of assessments in-house, WIOA could establish a network of industry-based mentors or advisors to provide additional specific assessments and career counseling. To start this process, we recommend that WIOA leverage New Hampshire’s newly formed Sector Partnership Initiative and identify a potential employer partner in each sector of focus in the (healthcare, manufacturing, hospitality, tech.)^[5]

State Variation and Common Practices

Several states utilize some of the same individual assessment tools – including TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education Level), WorkKeys, and O*NET Interest Profiler – yet overall, no two states’ assessment procedure is the same. Nevertheless, we identified several common practices across the six WIOA programs that participated in our conference call. Like New Hampshire, every state described using a panel of assessment tools designed to yield holistic results about WIOA participants’ abilities and interests. Consensus among conference call participants was that no one assessment tool is sufficient – several different types of assessments are needed in order to engage with the multiple domains of employability. The assessment tools that WIB leaders described fall, for the most part, under the three general categories identified above: academic assessment, occupation-specific assessment, and interest inventory. All of the states represented on the conference call utilize at least one assessment for each of these three categories, and some states utilize additional assessments to measure soft skills, personality, IQ, and to screen for barriers to employment.

Comparison of Assessment Tools

The following table provides an overview of a range of existing skills assessment tools. The tools are organized by assessment type and accompanied by brief notes on salient features, including how the assessment is administered, if the tool is validated, and if it is available for free. Links to assessment tools are provided, with the exception of those assessments that are internal documents in relatively narrow use in specific programs/agencies. This table captures the assessments currently in use in New Hampshire, Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, and Utah, as well as other tools the research team came across during the course of this evaluation. Please note that the table is not

exhaustive – the world of skills assessment is vast and constantly changing, and we were not able to represent all of the skills assessment tools available in the market.

Please note that if an assessment is not labeled as a “validated tool” in the table, this does not necessarily mean that the tool has not been validated, but rather that the researchers were unable to locate this information. Similarly, although most assessment tools have been validated, many of the studies that demonstrate validity are sponsored/commissioned by the corporation that owns (and sells) the assessment itself. This may constitute a conflict of interest.

Assessment	Academic	Occupation-Specific	Interest Inventory	Other	States Where In Use
Brigance Math	✓				NH
Job Corps Reading Screening	✓				NH
ACCUPLACER	✓				Community college systems
CASAS	✓				CA, NH WorkReady
OWRA (Online Work Readiness Assessment Tool)	✓			Soft Skills, Barrier Screen	TANF program
WorkKeys/KeyTrain	✓	✓		Soft Skills	UT, NH WorkReady
TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education Levels)	✓				AK, ND, MT, NH Dept of Ed
LMI Achiever	✓			Soft Skills, Personality	ND
EdITS CAPS (Career Ability Placement Survey)	✓	✓			MT
COMPASS	✓				
Education Planner	✓			Personality, Learning Style	
CareerScope	✓		✓		MT
Diferential Aptitude Test (DAT)	✓				MT
Criteria Pre-Employment Testing	✓	✓		Personality	
Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB)	✓		✓		U.S. Armed Forces
O*NET Ability Profiler	✓	✓			
eSkill	✓	✓			MT
ProveIt		✓		Soft Skills	NH, MT
TORQ		✓			NH, MA, AR, CO, FL, PA, IN
Vocational Evaluation		✓			NH VocRehab
Birkman		✓	✓	Personality	
Career Assessment Inventory (CAI)		✓	✓		MT
SkillScan		✓			MA
Wonderlic		✓		Soft Skills, Personality, IQ	AK
EdITS COPEs (Career Orientation Placement and Evaluation)			✓	Personality	MT
O*NET Interest Profiler			✓		NH, AK, MT, ND, UT
O*NET Work Importance Locator			✓	Work Values	
Holland Occupational Themes			✓	Personality	NH WorkReady
EdITS COPS (Career Occupational Preference System)			✓		MT
Career Decision-Making Revised (CDM-R)			✓		MT
Interest Determination, Exploration & Assessment System (IDEAS)			✓		MT
Strong Interest Inventory (SII)			✓		MT
Kiersey Temperament Sorter				Personality	
Myers-Briggs Type Indicator				Personality	AK
DISC				Soft Skills, Personality	
Learning Needs Screening Tool				Barrier Screen	WA
Self-Directed Search (SDS)				Personality	MT

	Academic	Occupation-Specific	Interest Inventory	Other	States Where In Use	Notes
Alaska Career Information System (AKCIS):					Alaska	Web-based, State-specific platform
O*NET Interest Profiler Short Form			✓			
Career Cluster Inventory			✓			
Learning Styles Survey	✓					
SKILLS Inventory		✓				
Work Importance Locator				Work Values		
Workplace Employability Skills		✓				
Reality Check				Personal Finance		Budget planning and income projection tool
RUReadyND?:					North Dakota	Web-based, State-specific platform
O*NET Interest Profiler Short Form			✓			
Work Values Sorter				Work Values		
Basic Skills Survey	✓					Self-assessment
Transferable Skills Checklist		✓				Self-assessment
Career Cluster Survey			✓			
The Career Key			✓			
UtahFutures:					Utah	Web-based, State-specific platform
Reality Check				Personal Finance		Budget planning and income projection tool
O*NET Interest Profiler			✓			
Career Cluster			✓			
Self Employment			✓	Soft Skills, Personality		Designed to evaluate if self-employment may be a good fit for the test-taker
Work Importance				Work Values		
World of Work				Personality		Based on Holland Occupational Themes
Montana Career Information System (MCIS):					Montana	Web-based, State-specific platform
O*NET Interest Profiler			✓			
Career Cluster Inventory			✓			
Learning Styles Survey	✓					
SKILLS Inventory		✓				
Work Importance Locator				Work Values		
Workplace Employability Skills		✓				
Reality Check				Personal Finance		Budget planning and income projection tool

4. Update tools and link to labor market information

Participants and staff agree that the assessment tools currently used in New Hampshire are blunt and outdated instruments (see above). The current tools identify occupation, academic and interest areas. However, some participants and staff mentioned that the tools were outdated, contained mistakes, and were not relevant to the skills required in the workplace.

“It is poorly written and I feel like that so there are a handful, if I looked at it I could point them out, but there are probably two or three questions that I feel like are consistently answered wrong because, depending on how you interpret it... I could see either or, you know what I mean?”

[Staff Focus Group]

Close to one in five survey respondents (18%) suggests improving or updating the assessment tools. One stated, “They [i.e., the assessment tools] could be more current. There are much better career assessments available.” Another suggested, “Update the use of written assessments. Make them all via computer.” And one noted their seeming irrelevance; “The assessment tests are very basic and in some ways had nothing to do with what I actually am trained to do.” Career Navigators also expressed a desire to understand the whole person more thoroughly.

Updated tools could include other domains of participants’ interests and abilities, strengths, personalities and barriers that they face. Defining what needs to be assessed for each WIOA participant group (see Figure 1) can help to determine what tools are best suited. Also, labor market information is not consistently integrated into current assessment practices. All of the states represented on the call agreed that it is a persistent challenge to integrate labor market information into the assessment process. WIOA programs face the challenge of connecting (or reconciling) participants’ skills and interests with the training and employment opportunities that are actually available in their state or locality.

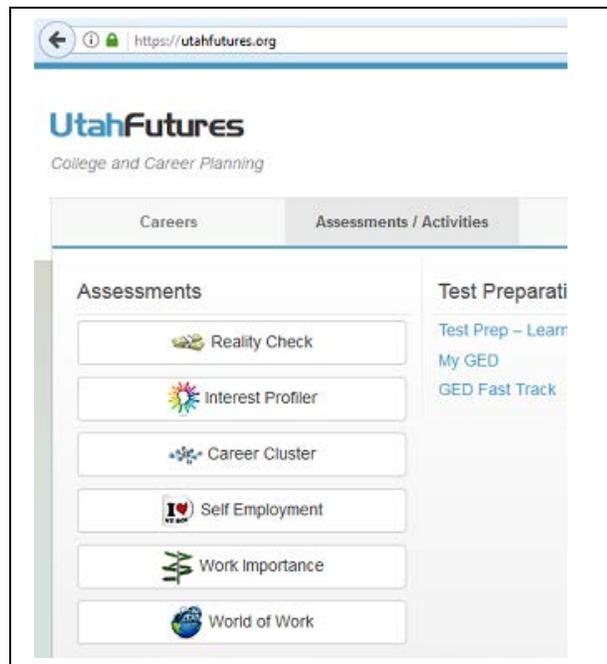
Some states are working to address this challenge with online, state-specific platforms that bring together assessments and real-time labor market data. In Utah, WIOA participants can complete assessments on the “UtahFutures” site for college and career planning, and explore occupations that correlate with their results. All UtahFutures occupation descriptions return current job postings, which are regularly updated and collected from the Utah Department of Workforce Services database.

Furthermore, participants can access state-level data on occupational wages, growth, demand, and education requirements. Montana, Alaska, and North Dakota’s platforms also host skills assessments as well as career search tools. Participants can complete an interest inventory, browse the occupations that are suggested, examine education and experience requirements, and access state-level data on earnings and industry outlook. Integrating labor market data and skills assessment results – and making that information available in a centralized database – allows participants to begin to plot a career path and better understand the employment landscape.

5. Consider developing a website or web-based platform

As stated earlier, there are many benefits to using web-based assessment tools. Housing tools online also facilitates Career Navigator and participant access to these tools, and promotes more consistent data collection.

A first step toward this goal is to use the JobMatch system or create web page on the SNHS website that spells out the assessment procedures, contains links to assessment tools, and links to local labor market information, to create a more streamlined assessment process.



Housing assessments on one website could facilitate the process of generating a data clearinghouse that all practitioners can access to view results from multiple assessments and gain more information about participants. Ideally, participants would also have ongoing access to their assessment results and could use the information as they progress through their career planning process. Finally, utilizing centrally-located web-based tools and procedures will enhance consistency in assessment practice across the state.

C. Staff- and Stakeholder-Related Recommendations

6. Provide initial and ongoing staff training

Staff reported that a particular barrier to using Prove-It and TORQ was a lack of sufficient training. And the amount and quality of training they received for the standard WIOA assessments varied widely. This variation compromises consistency in the assessment experience, and may limit the ability of those who received less training to use assessments effectively. If the WIOA program chooses to make use of more assessment tools to improve service, then training becomes even more important.

We recommend regular ongoing training for staff to be able to administer assessments and interpret results. In addition, it is important to train Career Navigators on the potential biases embedded in assessments and the harm that they can do, and in how to leverage information that is produced and incorporate assessment results into a larger career counseling process. WIB leaders in Utah note that their holistic assessment approach (which includes a two-generation strategy to probe participants for sensitive information) hinges on regular career counselor training.

7. Deepen partnerships

Several respondents reported having taken similar assessments as part of other partner job readiness programs, and a few were confused about the many different computer and paper tests they had taken in different programs in recent years and frustrated at having to spend time duplicating their efforts. We recommend that WIOA strengthen its partnerships with partner programs to include partnering in assessment. For example, participants going into training at community college take the Accuplacer test, and this yields more accurate information on academic skill than the tests currently used in WIOA. Enabling partners to share assessment results would eliminate participant confusion and offer providers more information on participants to help in the career planning process. Ideally, over time partners could collaborate to link assessments and results through a workforce system-wide, web-based platform.

As specified above, Career Navigators mentioned limited English speakers as particularly difficult to assess. Deepening engagement with the Department of Education and other ESOL programs in the state to make use of their assessments could improve WIOA service to limited English speakers. Likewise, Career Navigators mentioned the challenge of identifying disabilities, including learning disabilities, in participants, and in knowing how to best support participants with disabilities. Facilitating use of Vocational

Staff training is critical to proper administration and use of assessments, and can facilitate a holistic assessment process.

Rehabilitation resources and consultation with their staff would provide Career Navigators with tools to better serve this population.

V. ASSESSMENTS AT THEIR BEST: INFORMING TRAINING AND CAREER PATHWAYS

Despite the challenges and complexities of assessments, many WIOA participants were grateful for the ability to meet with their Career Navigators and access resources to upgrade their skills. In some cases, assessments served their intended purpose.

One participant described how the assessment process helped her feel confident that she had the skills necessary to enter a training program. Another felt validated when her interest profiler results matched her actual interests. Over half of survey respondents (54.31%) agree that the assessments made them feel good about themselves and their skills, and two-thirds (65.82%) agree that the assessments reflect their actual interests and abilities. This substantiation of their perceptions of self was at times motivating.

It made me ponder and think “well, maybe a career change!” But part of it is like I didn’t really have an interest in what they suggested. I just am drawn to the technical field.

[Participant Interview]

She wanted to make sure that if I’m entering it I have the background knowledge and the experience in order to succeed. Otherwise would I be better off taking some night classes in prerequisite before I entered this program... that was really helpful knowing that I would succeed.”

[Participant Interview]

In addition to identifying and validating skills, participants noted that it was helpful to see labor market information about the career they were pursuing. Career Navigators spend time with participants reviewing opportunities available through the Job Match system or industry projections available through DOL. In a best case scenario, these data would be directly linked to and available based on results of assessments, but in the meantime, staff members use the tools available to them.

I was a teacher and I was really thinking about getting out of teaching, so WIOA... they helped me tremendously. The counselor, she helped weed out what I really would be good at and what I would be interested in. And that was nice, I really enjoyed that. Because I really wasn’t sure. You know... programs that she used that we looked at how and what would be the strong jobs coming up and everything.

[Participant Interview]

A common theme was the need for assessments to help ground people in the reality of what jobs are available and achievable versus the “dream job” or best fit based on interests and personality. One participant reported a positive experience of introspection after taking the Birkman assessment (see Comparison of Assessment Tools below for a description).

They asked some very soul-searching type questions as to really floor you, you know, because we live with ourselves every day but we don’t really know ourselves all that well. And so the, if it was helpful unfortunately my desires were here at the time and reality was over here.

[Participant Interview]

This is one example of career counseling at its best. In a best case scenario, participants and Career Navigators work together to administer appropriate assessment tools and utilize results to figure out the best path forward given both the personal (skills) and structural (labor market) opportunities available.

When asked if the assessments helped to determine their career path, some participants found the interest profiler helpful in terms of helping them think of different possibilities, and others pursued their original training goal regardless of whether the interest profiler results aligned with their occupational goals. Several respondents said the counselor just wanted them to look through and “check out the approved schools because they have certain schools that they’ll fund.” [Interview 20]

I had my career set in mind. And I already knew what school I wanted to go to... She even offered to talk about other schools and that’s why I picked that one after all of that... So, they didn’t really offer too much other insight on that.

[Participant Interview]

It opened my mind on different possibilities.

[Participant Interview]

Interestingly, several people noted that the O*NET interest inventory opened their mind, but when pushed about whether the results changed their career trajectory, they said no. In other words, although the interest inventory made people think differently about themselves, their opportunities, and their potential, it did not have enough of an effect to change their plans for training. Likewise survey data show that only 9.48% of respondents agree that the assessment results changed their career plans significantly.

In order for assessments to truly inform career pathways, WIOA would need to shift towards a more in-depth career counseling approach. Survey results corroborate this point. When asked what they wished career navigators had discussed with them at the beginning of their relationship, the most common request (16%) was for more career counseling. Specifically, respondents cited a desire for more conversation about how to

identify what career mapped onto their skills and interests, and about how that might match with what employers in the area are looking for. This might require smaller caseloads, longer appointments, and intentional relationship building. But as described above, it is possible that not all WIOA participants need this level of support. The following quote describes how one participant experienced this positive interaction between assessments and career counseling.

So [my Career Navigator] was very helpful in giving me pretests in order to make sure that my competency level would guarantee that I would be successful in that course... And then we just discussed what the job forecast would be for this degree where I would wanna go with it. If it was a growing field, what was average pay. Would there be more jobs available? How many are available now? And what is the projection for the growth of that industry. So that helps you know which direction because the health information management can go many different ways... You can do data entry, you can do information technology, you could do quality control, you can do auditing. So but we kinda went a little bit further into the program to see which direction would suit me best for my personality, for my skill sets, for my experience, and that was extremely helpful. It gave me a lot more knowledge before I do get in in one way or another I guess which direction I was going we made sure that that was the best fit for me.

[Participant Interview]

Moving forward, the New Hampshire WIOA program could pursue some of the recommendations presented in this report by altering state regulations. For example, Career Navigators express a constant pressure to find ways to justify eligibility for training dollars, and they appreciate the minimal nature of the current assessment procedure because it makes that justification easier. However, the cost of this minimal assessment process is a lack of information generated to improve services. State regulations could, instead, increase the number of pathways to eligibility for training dollars, thus alleviating the pressure on Career Navigators and increasing their ability to serve participants holistically. Other recommendations do not require significant funding or policy changes. We suggest that the program take actions in the short-term to streamline the assessment process, deepen partnerships, and enhance staff training to maximize utilization of scarce resources, while pursuing longer-term goals.

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APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH METHODS

The research team at IASP gathered data from multiple sources to generate a holistic view of New Hampshire's assessment procedures. The research had three primary aims:

1. Identify the particular assessment tools currently in use in New Hampshire, the skills and abilities that those tools measure, and the procedures by which they are administered.
2. Examine the extent to which assessment results relate to and/or inform Career Navigators' broader work with participants.
3. Solicit feedback about the ways in which assessment tools and practices might be changed in order to develop a more relevant and useful skills assessment procedure.

Quantitative and qualitative data sources include:

- An online, statewide survey of current and recently-exited (within the past year) participants
- Limited observation of WIOA program participant intake and assessment,
- Individual interviews with twenty current and/or recently-exited participants in the Nashua, Manchester, and Seacoast regions
- Focus groups with Career Navigator staff
- A conference call with Workforce Investment Board (WIB) leaders in other single-WIB states, including Montana, Utah, Alaska, and North Dakota. Representatives from Delaware, Idaho, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming were also invited to join the conference call, but declined to participate. The

conference call was convened in order to gather information about other states' approaches to WIOA program participant assessment, and gain insight about any emerging promising practices and/or lessons learned by WIOA program administrators in other parts of the country.

This section will detail the data collection and analysis processes. All research activities were approved by the Brandeis University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

A. Data sources and procedures

1. Survey

IASP developed an online survey to learn about participants' experience with the assessment process. The survey questions are designed to reveal how the process looks from participants' point of view as well as the extent to which they benefit from the assessment results during their participation in the WIOA program. The survey was constructed such that participants could skip any questions they did not want to answer.

WIOA staff emailed the survey to the approximately 500 people who used WIOA services in the past two years. We received 141 responses. Participants from nine NH Works centers took the survey, with the majority of responses coming from two centers: Manchester (28%) and Portsmouth (24%). More than three-quarters of the survey respondents entered the WIOA program within a year prior to taking the survey, with about a third (35%) reporting having used services between 5 and 8 months ago, and another quarter (24%) between 0 and 4 months ago. The most common survey respondents are women over the age of 55. Over half (55%) of respondents are women, and 4 in 10 (42%) are over the age of 55. Another third (35%) are between the ages of 45 and 54. Likewise, more than two-thirds (65%) have no children living at home. The vast majority of respondents (88%) are white. Almost all (95%) speak English as their primary language. And all (100%) have at least a high school diploma or equivalent. Just over half (52%) are currently working.

We conducted bivariate statistical analysis of key variables related to participant opinion of assessment, to examine differences in opinion by income level. Low response rate on income questions limited our ability to detect significant findings. The analyses did not show any pertinent differences in opinion. The small sample size prohibited similar analysis by other potentially significant characteristics such as race and level of education.

2. Participant Interviews

We completed twenty individual interviews with WIOA participants from the past two years. Interview respondents were compensated for their time with a \$50 gift card to Market Basket. We recruited these interviews through several procedures: 1) Career

Navigators sent out an email to all WIOA participants from the past two years. 2) We left flyers advertising the opportunity to participate in interviews at two NH Works centers. 3) At the end of the online survey, we advertised the opportunity to participate in interviews.

All members of the research team conducted interviews, in-person when possible and by phone when necessary. Interviews lasted about an hour. Interviews were either recorded (recordings were transcribed later) or, in lieu of recording, the researcher took detailed handwritten notes during the interview. Research staff analyzed the transcripts and notes using qualitative data analysis software. The analysis was both deductive and inductive, using both a priori codes and generating codes as themes emerged.

Similar to the survey sample, the interview sample was mostly Non-Hispanic White and middle-aged (average age 50). However, the interview respondents differed from the survey sample in several important ways: Interview respondents are more likely to be female, less likely to be married or to have children at home, they had a higher level of education overall than survey respondents but were less likely to be working at the time of data collection.

Career Navigator Focus Groups

We completed two staff focus groups at two New Hampshire Works Centers. New Hampshire Works staff contacted the Career Navigators to inform them of the focus groups. One focus group convened the Career Navigators from all the rural regions and the other from the urban regions. Focus groups lasted about 90 minutes and were audio recorded. Research staff conducted thematic analysis of the transcripts.

3. WIB call

To provide perspective on New Hampshire's assessment practices for the WIOA program, the research team reached out to other states. Because New Hampshire is a single-WIB state, with uniform practices statewide, the research team first identified the other states that operate with a single WIB. In addition to New Hampshire, the other nine single-WIB states in the US are Alaska, Delaware, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont and Wyoming.

In partnership with the Office of Workforce Opportunity, we reached out to these nine states to join us in a phone conversation on assessment practices. We spoke with representatives from Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Utah together for approximately 90 minutes about their assessment tools and procedures, and followed up the call by sharing resources between all five states.

Limitations

This research faces some important limitations which may compromise the validity of the results. Most notably, the small sample size and potential for bias in the interview and survey samples might skew the results. In spite of these limitations, the multiple data sources employed present a rich and complex picture of the state of New Hampshire's WIOA assessment process.

In order to complete this research in a timely manner, the research team made the decision to recruit survey respondents by email only, and to restrict the interview sample to twenty. We received 141 responses to the survey, which is a robust sample, but is not of sufficient size to divide the sample to detect differences along lines of income, education or race. The small sample size, therefore, limits our analytic potential. Likewise, by only talking to twenty former participants, we may have missed important perspectives that a larger sample would have revealed.

In addition, we may have ended up with a sample that is not representative of the population of the state as a whole. The noted differences between the interview and survey samples suggest bias, but we are unable to compare either of these populations to the general WIOA participant population. However, by limiting our recruitment methods to email, we eliminated the possibility for those without a computer or who are not computer literate to participate. Our sample, therefore, might be skewed toward the more highly educated. Likewise, we were only able to conduct staff focus groups in two locations, and, therefore, may have missed talking to staff from more remote parts of the state. Finally, because our research team was only able to interview and construct a survey in English, we missed participation from non-English speakers. These restrictions to the sample were necessary to make the study feasible, but we acknowledge their potential impact on the findings.

B. Data collection instruments

1. Survey

Consent to Participate

What is this Study?

This survey is part of a study being conducted by the Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP) at Brandeis University in partnership with Southern New Hampshire Services to evaluate the current assessment tools and practices used by New Hampshire's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs at the New Hampshire Works Centers. We are particularly interested in learning about your experience as a NH Works Center program participant. Your feedback about your

experience with the WIOA assessments and with your career navigator will be especially useful as we seek to improve NH Works assessment procedure and service delivery.

It's up to you

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can skip any question you choose not to answer and/or suspend or terminate the survey at any time without penalty.

Privacy

This survey is anonymous. We will not ask you for your name or any other identifying information. If you share identifying information with us through open-ended questions, it will not be included in oral or written reports on the research. We will maintain confidentiality by keeping data private, removing names and other personal information (including but not limited to your name, names of schools or places of employment, other individuals, towns, and cities), and destroying data that contains personal information when the project is complete. This survey is not considered an evaluation of your career navigator's work, and your participation or non-participation will have no bearing on your relationship with Southern New Hampshire Services, NH Works, or IASP.

Risks

Some parts of the survey may include questions that produce discomfort for you. You can always choose not to answer certain questions if they make you uncomfortable. You may know one or more of the people who told you about this study. The researchers will not tell them or others whether or not you decided to participate, and the information you share will be confidential.

Who to contact with questions

Researchers for this project are Jessica Santos, PhD, Principal Investigator, and Sara Chaganti, MS, ABD, Co-Principal Investigator, and Liz Olson, Graduate Research Assistant, with the Heller School for Social Policy and Management Brandeis University. If you have questions at any time during the research process, please contact Liz Olson at eholson@brandeis.edu or 860-212-7335. If you have questions

about your rights as a research subject please contact the Brandeis Institutional Review Board at irb@brandeis.edu or 781- 736-8133.

1. Please indicate whether you consent to participate in this survey.
 - I consent to participate.
 - I do NOT consent to participate.

Work Center Entry

We are interested in learning about your experience in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) program at New Hampshire Works. We are especially interested in your experience with the program's assessment tools and procedures, as well as with your career navigator. We appreciate your honest feedback.

2. In the last year, which NH Works Center did you attend?

3. Please indicate the month and year you started in the NH Works WIOA program. (If you don't remember the exact date, please make your best guess.)

Work Center Experience

4. Please check all that apply. When I first entered the WIOA program:
 - I talked with my career navigator about my career history
 - I talked with my career navigator about my interests and skills
 - I talked with my career navigator about my math and reading abilities
 - I completed one or more written assessments or tests
 - I completed one or more assessments or tests on the computer
5. What do you wish your career navigator had asked you when you started working together?

Work Center Assessments

6. Please indicate the assessment(s) you completed. Check all that apply:
- Math test (on paper - Borgance math test)
 - Reading test (on paper - Job Corps reading screening test (JCRST))
 - ONET interest profiler (on the computer)
 - ONET work importance profiler (on the computer)
 - Prove It (on the computer)
 - TORQ (on the computer)
 - Don't remember
7. Approximately how much time did you spend on assessments during your intake process?
- Less than 30 minutes
 - Between 30 minutes and 1 hour
 - More than 1 hour
 - More than 2 hours
 - Don't remember
8. Did you receive the results of your assessments?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't remember
9. Were you surprised by those results?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't remember

Work Center Assessments

10. What surprised you about your assessment results?

Work Center Assessments

11. Rate your agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The assessment results reflected my actual abilities and	<input type="radio"/>				
I discussed the results of my assessments with my <input type="radio"/> career navigator.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The assessment results made me feel good about myself	<input type="radio"/>				
I learned something about myself from the <input type="radio"/> assessment results.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
The assessments changed my career plans significantly.	<input type="radio"/>				
I have gone back and looked at or used the assessment results again.	<input type="radio"/>				

12. What would you change about the assessment tools that were used?

13. What do you wish was reflected in your assessment process?

14. What would you like to see differently in the Work Center program?

Demographics

15. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other

16. What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44

- 45-54
- 55 or older

17. Are you Hispanic or Latino(a)?

- Yes
- No

18. What is your race or ethnicity? Please check all that apply.

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

19. What is your primary language?

- English
- Spanish
- Other (please specify)

Household Size

20. How many people live in your household?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Other (please specify)

21. Including yourself, how many people in your household are 18 or older?

1

2

3

4

Other (please specify)

22. How many children live in your household?

0

1

2

3

4

Other (please specify)

Income and Education

23. What is your yearly household income? (best estimate of pre-tax income)

\$25,000 or below

\$25,000-\$37,500

\$37,500-\$50,000

- \$50,000-\$67,500
- \$67,500-\$80,000
- \$80,000 or above

24. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than high school
- High school graduate or equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college
- Associate's degree (for example: AA, AS)
- Bachelor's degree (for example: AB, BA, BS)
- Master's degree (for example: MA, MS, MSW, MEd)
- Other advanced degree (for example: PhD, JD, MD)

25. Do you have any professional licenses or certifications? (For example: LNA, electrician, etc.)

- No
- Yes (please specify)

26. Are you currently in school?

- No
- Yes

School Information

27. What program and school are you attending?

Employment Status

28. In the last week, did you work for pay?

Yes

No

29. What is your current position?

30. What is the organization you work for?

31. How long have you held his job?

Less than a month

1-3 months

3-6 months

6 months-1 year

More than 1 year

32. How many hours do you work per week?

33. What is your hourly wage?

34. Does your position include employee benefits? (For example: medical insurance, paid time off, retirement benefits, etc.)

Yes

No

35. In the last week, were you looking for work?

Yes

No

Career History

36. In the last three years, how many jobs have you held?

0

1

2

3

4

5

More than 5

37. Please list your job title and place of employment for each of the jobs you've held in the past 3 years:

Future Goals

38. What are your career plans for the future?

Interview Sign Up

We are also conducting interviews for this study. If you would like to sign up for a 1-hour interview and receive a \$50 gift certificate for your time, please contact Liz Olson by email at eholson@brandeis.edu or by phone/text at 860-212-7335.

Survey Completion

Thank you for taking the time to complete our survey. Your feedback is invaluable to our work to improve the WIOA program, and we appreciate your time

39. If you would like to enter into a raffle for a \$50 amazon gift card for completing this survey, please share your email here:

2. Participant Interview Protocol

1. WIOA ASESMENT

- When did you first come to the career center to access services?
- How did you get connected to the career center?
- Describe what services you have received from WIOA
- What assessment or assessments do you remember taking during your intake at the career center or with your WIOA career navigator? Probes: math, reading, career interests, skills
- What do you remember about them?
- How long did the assessment or assessments take?
- Did you find them challenging? Why or why not?
- Did anything about the assessment(s) surprise you? Please describe.
- Did you learn anything from taking the assessment(s)? What did you learn?
- Did you talk through the results of your assessment(s) with your career navigator?
 - What was that conversation like? Was this the first time you had an in-depth conversation with your navigator?
- How did you feel about those results?

- Do you believe your results reflected your abilities? Did they affect the way you were feeling about your career prospects?
- Did you and your career navigator ever refer back to the assessment(s) in your work together? Please describe.
- Did your career navigator say anything to you about how s/he might use the assessment results?
- After learning about your results, did you work with your navigator to identify goals to work toward/action steps to take based on the strengths and areas of improvement that the assessments identified? Did you make any decisions based on the results of these assessments?
- Did your assessment results feel relevant to your own personal goals? Did they relate to what you hoped to gain from your participation in the Work Center program?
- Can you think of anything that you wish the assessment(s) had asked that they did not ask? Please describe.
- What could the WIOA program do to improve the assessment process?
- Do you think women would experience the assessment(s) differently than men?
- Do you think people from diverse backgrounds would experience the assessment(s) differently than white people? (Why or why not?)

2. EXPERIENCE WITH THE CAREER CENTER

- After your intake, what services did your career navigator provide?
- Did the career center help you to get your current job? Please describe this process
- What did you learn from career center services?
- What are your career plans for the future? How did you come up with these plans?
- What do you wish the career center would provide that would be most helpful to you as you move along your career path?

3. EXPERIENCE IN WORKFORCE

- Current position, time in this job
- Work history prior to seeking WIOA services
- Job search practices prior to seeking WIOA services
- Satisfaction with current job
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

3. Career Navigator Interview Protocol

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL – CAREER NAVIGATOR STAFF

The Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP) at Brandeis University is conducting a study in partnership with Southern New Hampshire Services to develop knowledge of the assessment process for customers accessing career services through WIOA. My name is Sara Chaganti, and this is Liz Olson. We are researchers at IASP and are hosting focus groups of WIOA staff to learn more about how you use the assessment process in working with customers.

Your responses will be kept confidential and only discussed in the aggregate with what we learn from all the health care providers we interview. The confidentiality consent form we would like you to sign before we proceed affirms this. Is it okay to record your responses to allow us to focus more on the discussion than note taking?

INTRODUCTIONS

Let's start by going around and introducing ourselves. Please tell us your name, position, which geographic area you cover, and how long you have been working in the employment field. [Sara and Liz start – give very brief intro on your own research and non-research work to establish credibility].

YOUR POSITION AND YOUR PARTICIPANTS

Now we'll start the focus group. I'll be asking you questions as a group, and we don't need everyone to answer every question. We're looking for areas where you agree as well as areas where you may feel differently about things – we don't need to come to consensus together on anything! That's the beauty of a focus group (unlike many meetings you probably have – haha – we've been there). We just want to hear your thoughts and perspectives – first about your work in general, and then more specifically about the assessments you give to participants in WIOA.

So let's start by discussing your work with individuals and families in the WIOA program

1. What is the thing you are most proud of in your work that you have seen make a difference in the lives of your participants?
2. What is the most challenging aspect of your work?
3. Can you describe the population with whom you work?

ASSESSMENTS – WHAT AND HOW ADMINISTERED

Our job with this study is to understand the utility of the assessments that you do at WIOA with participants when they first come into the program and to make

recommendations to Southern NH Services and the Office of Workforce Opportunity for improving the assessment piece of the program.

We understand that you do the Brigance math test that results in a score by grade level, and the Job Corps Reading Screening Test assessment on paper, and then you also have access to the O*NET Interest Profiler, PROVE IT and TORQ online as optional assessments. Is that correct?

1. Let's start by talking about the reading and math assessments. Can you describe how you administer these when a participant first joins the program? Probes:

- *Do customers complete in office? At home?*
- *By themselves? In public space?*
- *During the first appointment? After a few appointments?*
How/when/where does scoring occur

[Does this sound consistent across your different offices? Any differences?]

2. How do you share assessment results with clients?

- Do customers receive a copy of their results?
- What are these conversations like?
- What kind of information do you get from them and how do you use it?
 - Do the assessments produce information about clients that is useful (to the Navigator and to clients themselves) regardless of the industry in which the client works/intends to work?
- Do you refer back to assessments throughout your work with customers?
- What do you like/dislike about these assessments?
 - *Recording results, discussing results*

3. Ok now please walk us through the same information about the O*NET Interest Profiler (use probes when necessary)

- Do customers receive a copy of their results?
- What are these conversations like?
- What kind of information do you get from them and how do you use it?
 - Do the assessments produce information about clients that is useful (to the Navigator and to clients themselves) regardless of the industry in which the client works/intends to work?
- Do you refer back to assessments throughout your work with customers?
- What do you like/dislike about these assessments?

4. And finally, we know the PROVE IT and TORQ are relatively new. By a show of hands, how many of you are currently using PROVE IT? TORQ? (we promise this is confidential – haha)

5. **For those of you who use them, can you describe how you administer them and use the results?**
 - Do customers receive a copy of their results?
 - What are these conversations like?
 - What kind of information do you get from them and how do you use it?
 - Do the assessments produce information about clients that is useful (to the Navigator and to clients themselves) regardless of the industry in which the client works/intends to work?
 - Do you refer back to assessments throughout your work with customers?
 - What do you like/dislike about these assessments?
6. **More on your experience with the optional assessment tools** (including TORQ, ProveIt, and ONET Work Importance)?
 - How do these tools differ from the required tools?
 - In what circumstances do you use them?
7. **Have a customer’s assessment results ever been a barrier to accessing funding for their desired training? Or to your work with customers?**
8. **Given the different populations that you work with, do you think clients with different backgrounds/identities experience the assessment process differently?** *(For example, how do race, ethnicity, and gender interact with/affect the assessment process?)*

ASSESSMENTS – WHY AND HOW USED

9. **Now let’s take a step back. As you described when we first started talking about your job, you are most proud of the moments when [...XYZ]. How do assessments fit into your overall work? How do they help your work with clients?**
 - Where does the assessment fit into the larger service package?
 - How do the assessments help hinder your work?
 - Why assess skills in the first place?
 - What’s useful/challenging about ONET Interest Profiler?
 - What’s useful/challenging about the reading comprehension?
 - What’s useful/challenging about the math?
10. **Do the assessments help prepare clients for training or employment?**
 - Do the required WIOA assessments mirror the types of tests that some employers ask job applicants to complete?

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT/RECOMMENDATIONS

Ok, now we want to get your thoughts on what you would like to see done differently.

- 11. What do you wish you could assess?** (*What do you wish you could measure, what info do you wish you could assess together with participants up front?*)
- 12. Are there other assessment tools that the WIOA program does not currently use that you would like to see integrated into the assessment process?**
 - How does WIOA's assessment process compare to that of the WorkReady program, for example?
- 13. Is there anything else you would like to add?**