



# Skill Up

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## BACKGROUND .....

In fall 2005, the United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI) launched Skill Up Rhode Island (Skill Up), a comprehensive \$1.65 million workforce development initiative. Skill Up aims to meet Rhode Island businesses' needs for skilled workers and to help economically disadvantaged Rhode Islanders

**Skill Up aims to meet Rhode Island businesses' needs for skilled workers and to help economically disadvantaged Rhode Islanders obtain family-supporting jobs.**

obtain family-supporting jobs. UWRI launched Skill Up because businesses in high growth industries faced a dearth of skilled workers for key occupations. At the same time, there was a paucity of targeted training for low-income/low-skilled individuals who might fill these positions and thereby increase their earnings and mobility. In addition, organizations that served low-income individuals and/or businesses did not collaborate in support of their overlapping interests. Skill Up attempted to address these challenges by (1) funding local partnerships to develop training and placement programs and (2) by catalyzing systems change efforts intended to increase resources for workforce development.



Over the next four years, UWRI's work on Skill Up spurred increases in state and local funding for related efforts and garnered national attention and investment. Workforce partnerships seeded through Skill Up enrolled 463 economically disadvantaged adults, graduated 77% of those eligible to complete training,<sup>1</sup> and placed 62% of those individuals in jobs. Skill Up Phase I served as the foundation for UWRI's continuing investment

<sup>1</sup> Skill Up partnerships served both entry-level workers, who intended to complete training within the lifetime of the initiative, and incumbent workers, whose training was not necessarily intended to be completed within Skill Up Phase I.

in workforce partnerships and systems change. UWRI engaged Abt Associates Inc. to evaluate this effort. This research brief highlights goals, activities, accomplishments and lessons learned through Skill Up Phase I.

## GOALS AND STRATEGIES

UWRI's primary goals for Skill Up Phase I were to:

- ✿ Place low-income/low-skilled Rhode Islanders in jobs that pay at least 150% of the R.I. minimum wage, that offer access to benefits, and that have the potential for advancement.
- ✿ Provide employers with qualified entry-level workers and with newly skilled incumbents for positions that employers have not previously been able to fill with qualified candidates.
- ✿ Encourage collaboration between state and local funders who support businesses, institutions of higher learning and/or low-income individuals, with the ultimate goal of shared advocacy for workforce development legislation and programs.
- ✿ Develop an internal funding formula that ensured consistent financial support for workforce development at UWRI.



Skill Up attempted to meet these goals by:

- ✿ Funding *workforce development partnerships* to develop and implement programs that would serve both workers and businesses and;
- ✿ Advocating for *systems changes* that would improve the coordination of services and funding that support low-income/low-skilled individuals and businesses/industries.

# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

## PARTNERSHIPS .....

UWRI seeded four workforce development partnerships. Each was tasked both with meeting low-income/low-skilled individuals' needs for good jobs and with meeting businesses' needs for capable workers for in-demand positions. Partnerships were comprised of community-based organizations (CBOs), training providers, and employers. They served a variety of disadvantaged populations and trained entry-level and incumbent workers for a range of jobs.

*Targeted jobs* were jobs that

- Paid 150% of the state minimum wage,
- Provided at least 30 hours of work per week,
- Offered access to public and/or private benefits, and
- Held opportunities for advancement.

UWRI also required grantees to focus on meeting partnering businesses' needs and to train workers for jobs that these employers needed to fill. UWRI believed that this would help to ensure the long-term viability of Skill Up programs because there would be *clear employer demand* for graduates.

In Skill Up Phase I, UWRI funded the following partnerships:

- ✧ **Woonsocket Employment Network/ Rhode to Success (WEN/RtS)**, a partnership among Family Resources Community Action (FRCA), a social service provider; CVS, a major local employer; and training providers in the Woonsocket area. This partnership focused on helping CVS to meet its needs for entry-level distribution center workers with low-income individuals from the Woonsocket area.



- ✿ **Building Futures**, a partnership comprised of YouthBuild



Providence, a youth training and employment-focused CBO; Providence Plan, a CBO focused on improving the economic well-being of Providence residents; and BuildRI, a collaboration between labor and management in the construction industry. This

partnership aimed to train and place low-income individuals in paid apprenticeships in construction.

- ✿ **Stepping Up**, a labor-management partnership led by the United

Nurses & Allied Professionals (UNAP)/RIH Health Care Education Trust and Women and Infants' Hospital (WIH). Other significant partners included Rhode Island Hospital, a major healthcare employer in the Providence area; the Teamsters, District 1199, and Service Employees International Union, unions present at the hospitals; and



Dorcas Place Adult and Family Learning Center and the Genesis Center, two local CBOs. Stepping Up focused on meeting participating hospitals' needs for skilled workers to fill in-demand jobs and improving community relations and the diversity of hospital staff. Stepping Up provided training and support for both entry-level and incumbent workers.

- ✿ **Marine Trades**,<sup>2</sup> a partnership comprised of the International Yacht



Restoration School (IYRS), which offers courses that prepare individuals for careers in the marine industry; The Rhode Island Marine Trades Association (RIMTA), a trade association that represents the marine

<sup>2</sup> Marine Trades ceased operating UWRI-funded programming in January 2009.

industry; and various employers and social service providers in the Newport area. This partnership focused on helping individuals to obtain and/or advance in jobs in the marine industry.

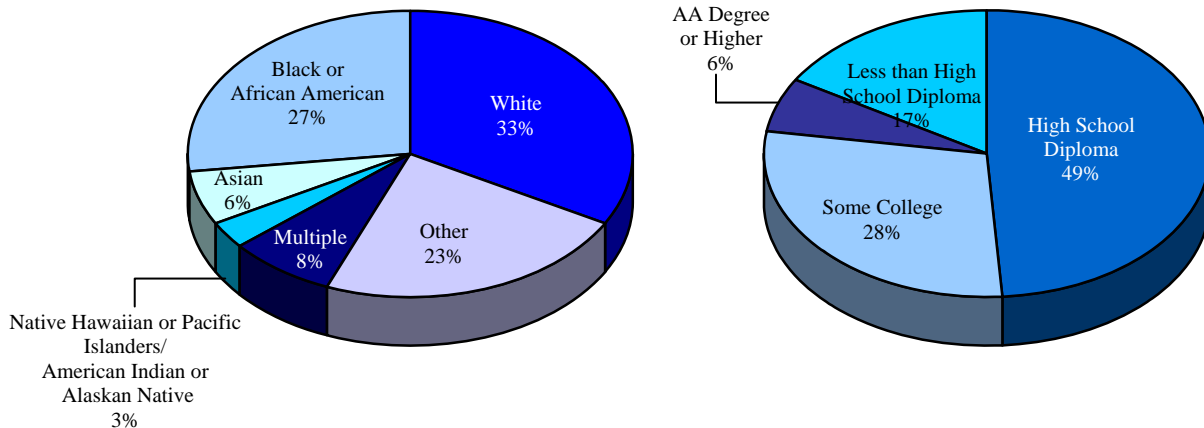
**During Skill Up Phase I, UWRI awarded partnerships a total of \$1,200,750 for activities that began in 2006 and continued through the end of 2009.**

### POPULATIONS SERVED

Skill Up partnerships served approximately equal numbers of men and women from diverse racial, ethnic and educational backgrounds (Exhibit 1). The majority of Skill Up Phase I program participants were White (33%) and Black or African American (27%). Twenty-six percent of participants identified as Hispanic or Latino.

Most Skill Up Phase I program participants (83%) had at least a high school diploma. Twenty-eight percent had some college, and an additional six percent had an Associate’s Degree or more. Unsurprisingly, higher percentages of incumbent workers had relatively higher levels of education. Ninety-five percent of incumbents had at least a high school degree, 60% had some college, and an additional 15% had an Associate’s Degree or more. On average, entry-level workers had less education, but most (80%) still had at least a high-school degree.

*EXHIBIT 1. POPULATIONS SERVED BY SKILL UP PARTNERSHIPS*  
(Entry-level and incumbent workers combined)

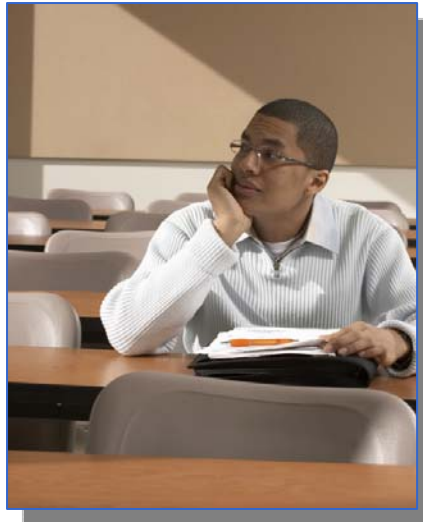


## PARTNERSHIP ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Skill Up Phase I partnerships developed programs that placed, retained, and advanced individuals in a variety of jobs. They also satisfied employers' needs for workers with specific occupational and workplace competencies, for improved relations with the communities, and/or for a more diverse workforce. Finally, most of the partnerships developed the capacity to operate workforce development programs and generated additional resources for their efforts.

Major accomplishments of the four Skill Up Phase I programs include:

- ✿ Enrolling 326 entry-level and 137 incumbent workers in workforce trainings.
- ✿ Serving diverse populations of workers with significant barriers to employment. (e.g., 31% of program enrollees had a criminal background and 14% were limited English proficient).
- ✿ Graduating 253 (77%) of the entry-level workers who enrolled in trainings.<sup>3</sup>
- ✿ Placing a total of 157 (62%) of the entry-level workers who completed training.
- ✿ Retaining a total of 108 (69% of the total placed in jobs) of entry-level workers in employment for six months.
- ✿ Advancing 88 (56%) of the entry-level workers placed through Skill Up Phase I partnerships.



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<sup>3</sup> Most incumbent workers' training expanded beyond the life of the initiative. For this reason, we do not include them in our tabulations of program graduates and other outcomes associated with completing training.

## **ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR BUSINESSES**

Although not all employers that started out in Skill Up partnerships remained with the initiative for its duration, those that did reported being very satisfied with the program.

The benefits that employers attributed to working with Skill Up included:

- ✦ Improving the quality of their staff,
- ✦ Diversifying their workforces, and
- ✦ Improving relations between their industries and the communities in which they worked.

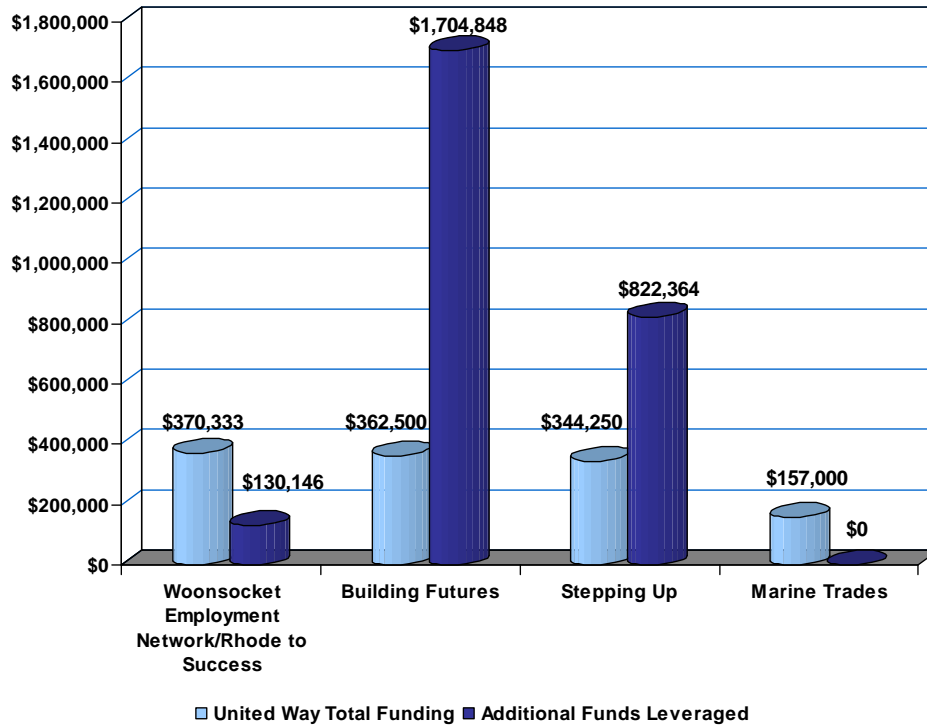
## **PARTNERSHIP SUSTAINABILITY AND RESOURCES LEVERAGED**

In addition to serving workers and businesses, partnerships engaged in capacity-building efforts to sustain and ultimately expand their ability to operate workforce development programs.

Three of the four partnerships generated additional resources for their UWRI-funded workforce development efforts. In total, UWRI's initial investment of \$1,200,750 catalyzed grants totaling \$2,657,358.

Exhibit II illustrates the distribution of funding from UWRI and other sources across the partnerships.

**Exhibit II. Additional Resources Leveraged by Skill Up Partnerships**



**SYSTEMS CHANGE .....**

**UWRI**

In addition to its support of Skill Up partnerships, UWRI also was involved in public policy reform efforts intended to increase and/or to improve the coordination of funding and services that supports businesses and low-income/low-skilled individuals. UWRI’s major accomplishments in this area include:

- ✦ Playing an essential role in developing, acquiring resources for, and expanding a funders collaborative comprised of members whose work supported various aspects of workforce development, and in encouraging collaborative members to focus on the needs of low-income/low-skilled workers.
- ✦ Working with state agencies that supported business, industry, students and/or low-income/low-skilled individuals to ensure that broad-scale programming or funding strategies adhered to the “dual customer” model (i.e., were designed to simultaneously meet the needs of both businesses and low-income/low-skilled workers).
- ✦ Working with the Governor’s Workforce Board (GWB) as it developed its five-year strategic plan for labor force development.
- ✦ Working with the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) as it developed its five-year strategic plan for supporting adult workers and learners in the state.
- ✦ Ensuring ongoing financial support from UWRI for Skill Up.



## PARTNERSHIPS

The Skill Up Workforce Development partnerships also had some success in contributing to systems change efforts intended to create demand for their services, and/or to improve the services they offered. For example, Building Futures contributed to systems change by:

- ✦ Creating demand for graduates of its pre-apprenticeship training program by calling for developers

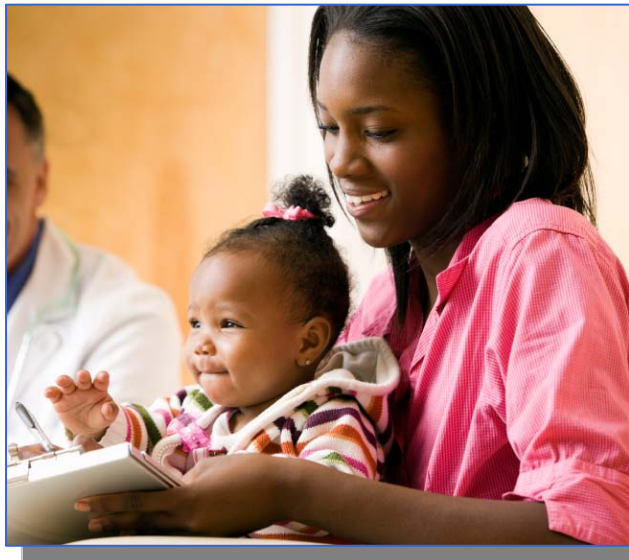


to require contractors to commit to using apprentices for at least 15% of the labor hours on various large construction projects.

- ✿ Marketing itself as an organization that could help construction contractors comply with public requirements for workforce diversity.

Similarly, Stepping Up accomplished systems change by:

- ✿ Achieving an array of procedural changes at Women and Infants' Hospital and Rhode Island Hospital that affected both entry-level and incumbent workers.



## LESSONS LEARNED .....

UWRI, partnerships and collaborating organizations' experiences in Skill Up Phase I suggest a number of crucial lessons learned for workforce intermediaries, for funders, and for other key stakeholders. The following lessons are drawn from UWRI's experiences working with the four Skill Up Phase I partnerships, facilitating collaboration among public and private entities that support workforce development and providing grants to practitioners launching public policy efforts in support of workforce development.

## LESSONS FOR FUNDERS

The evaluation of the implementation of Skill Up provides important lessons for funders that are interested in investing in workforce development programs.

### ✿ **Target industries with sector-wide employment opportunities and where workforce development makes good business sense**

When targeting programs serving businesses and industries, funders should support workforce development programs intended to serve industries that involve multiple employers, have established mechanisms for aggregating employer demand (such as committees of employers or unions or trade associations), and that have a clearly articulated need for employees likely to be served through workforce development programming.



### ✿ **Fund efforts explicitly for individuals with barriers to employment**

Workforce development programs that successfully train and place individuals with barriers to employment may have to provide their clients with extensive and enduring supports. Funders interested in training low-income/low-skilled individuals should focus their investment on grantees that specifically target this demographic and that have the capacity to meet their needs.

### ✿ **Facilitate additional funding for partnerships**

In light of the fact that workforce development grantees may take several years to develop, implement and refine programming, funders should consider advocating for outside organizations to invest in the grantees they support. Increasing the pool of resources available enables grantees to expand programming and to offer comprehensive services.

✦ **Recognize lead organizations' core capacities and limit funding accordingly**

When funding either individual grantees or partnerships, funders should consider limiting resources to only those partnerships that have a demonstrated commitment to and capacity to serve both businesses and low-income/low-skilled workers.

✦ **Recognize that engineering partnerships takes time and resources and that externally motivated partnerships may be difficult to sustain**

Although it may make sense for funders to engineer partnerships to ensure that they have the capacity to serve both businesses/industries and low-income/low-skilled individuals, funders should be extremely cautious when doing so.

## **LESSONS FOR PRACTITIONERS**

The evaluation yielded valuable lessons for practitioners interested in implementing workforce development programs.

✦ **Develop training programs that meet businesses' needs**

Although some practitioners may find it hard to consider businesses as clients, it is essential for practitioners to recognize that only by meeting business needs can programs effectively place low-income/low-skilled populations.



✦ **Communicate program participation and employer hiring requirements clearly and early; screen out individuals unlikely to get hired**

In order to maximize job placements and to utilize program resources efficiently, workforce development programs should ensure that they recruit participants who met the minimum requirements of the targeted employers and who are likely to succeed after getting placed.

✦ **Provide necessary supports to program participants**

Both service providers and businesses should recognize that it may be very difficult and time- and resource-intensive to launch workforce development programs for extremely disadvantaged individuals. Programs that target these individuals may need to provide them with extensive and enduring supports.

✦ **Establish realistic expectations for grant-based workforce development programs**

The actual number of entry-level participants placed by each Skill Up partnership suggests that individual workforce development programs operate on a relatively small scale. Practitioners need to communicate this to funders from the outset of programming.

✦ **Market workforce development programming as a low-cost strategy for building community relations, and for recruiting, screening, training, and supporting new workers**

Marketing workforce development programming to businesses based on projected increases in productivity or retention is less viable than marketing workforce development programming (1) as a strategy for obtaining qualified staff for un- or under-filled positions and (2) as good for both internal and external public relations.

✦ **Establish interim outcomes that incumbent worker programs may achieve within a typical grant cycle**

Programs targeting incumbents may not yield concrete data regarding targeted workers' completion of training or ability to get new jobs associated with that training within the lifetime of an initiative. Practitioners may wish to establish interim outcome goals that are achievable within the funding period.

## **SYSTEMS CHANGE**

There are a number of important lessons that can be gleaned from the analysis of UWRI's systems change efforts.

✦ **Remain informed about initiatives that may be relevant to workforce development**

UWRI's efforts to encourage collaboration capitalized on momentum that was building at the state level calling for training and education to be aligned with businesses' needs.

✦ **Engage other funders in the workforce development efforts your organization is funding**

UWRI engaged both public and private funders in Skill Up efforts.

✦ **Emphasize how your organization's funding can support potential collaborators**

When working with potential collaborators, UWRI emphasized that it had flexible funding that public agencies did not have.



✦ **Recognize that, despite some shared goals, potential collaborators will have different visions for their work and constraints on what they can support**

UWRI did not push for organizations to pool funding and to co-fund workforce development initiatives.

✦ **Seize opportunities to expand and enrich opportunities for program growth**

When UWRI learned about an opportunity for funding from National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS), its staff were sufficiently quick and flexible that they were able to apply for those resources and to engage in efforts aligned with NFWS goals.

**UWRI will apply lessons learned in Phase I to Skill Up Phase II, which begins in January 2010.**

For a copy of the full Skill Up Phase I Report or for more information about Skill Up Phase II, please contact Carmen Ferguson, Director Community Investment, at the United Way of Rhode Island: [carmen.ferguson@uwri.org](mailto:carmen.ferguson@uwri.org)