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**L** *Maine Department of Labor*  
LEGISLATIVE  
REPORT

*2010 Report on the  
Competitive Skills Scholarship Program*

Submitted by the Maine Department of Labor

February 2010

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**2010 Report on the  
Competitive Skills Scholarship Program  
to the  
Joint Standing Committee on Labor**

**Executive Summary**

The start of the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP) in April 2008 came at a critical time. At a time when laid off and low income workers have been unlikely to find sustainable new employment, CSSP has provided an opportunity for them to train for good paying jobs that are in demand in Maine. As we emerge from this difficult period, these workers are graduating with new skills that Maine employers need.

Established with bipartisan support by the Maine Legislature in 2007, CSSP provides support to adults with income below 200% of the federal poverty level to help them attend postsecondary education and training programs. CSSP assists with essentials such as tuition and fees not otherwise covered by financial aid, books and supplies, transportation, child care and, for those with income below 125% of the poverty level, a small stipend equal to one-third of the average unemployment benefit -- \$510 per month in fiscal year 2009. CSSP was established not only to help workers, but to help meet employers' needs for skilled labor. Thus, to be eligible for the program, workers must be training for a skilled occupation that has average wages above Maine's median wage (\$14.28 per hour) and that has been identified by the Department of Labor (the Department) as being in demand in Maine.

Although the program is in its infancy, the Department's early evaluation of the program has yielded the following promising results:

**CSSP is highly popular.** In the 2009 two-week application period, Maine's CareerCenters received 750 applications for the 100 openings that were available at that time. As of September 30, 2009, CSSP enrolled 475 people in its regular program and another 100 people in a parallel program, "Recovery CSSP," that is funded with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

**CSSP is serving adults who otherwise would be unlikely to be able to pursue training or education.** Most live below the poverty line, have lost their jobs and have coped with an unstable labor market, low wages and periods of unemployment.

**CSSP participants are pursuing occupations that are in demand in Maine.** The most popular career choices of participants are in health care, business and related fields, and trucking, heavy equipment operations and mechanics.

**If successful, CSSP participants will, on average, more than double their earnings.** The projected average hourly wage in the occupations that CSSP participants have chosen is \$23.03 -- more than double the most recent average hourly wage of CSSP participants of \$10.58.

**CSSP participants are staying in school and graduating.** In the first 15 months of the

program, only 2% of participants (8 people) left the program without graduating. This suggests that CSSP participants will successfully complete their programs at a far greater rate than is typical of their peers in higher education, where the drop out rate is over 30%.

**In spite of the recession, CSSP graduates are finding jobs.** Of the first 54 graduates from CSSP, 90% were employed when contacted in January 2010. 70% of these were employed full-time; 20% held part-time jobs. Among full-time workers, the average hourly wage was \$14.93 – a 41% increase in wage over the average wage for participants before entering CSSP.

**Participants report that CSSP is making a critical difference.** Responding to a survey, 98% reported that the program made a significant difference in their decision to attend education or training and/or in their ability to succeed in school. Here, in part, are some participant comments:

*“I thank God every day for finding my case worker and this amazing, life-changing fund.”*

*“Honestly, if it wasn't for CSSP, I would not have been able to continue my schooling.”*

*“This program has and is giving me a chance to finally fulfill my dream of 40 years.”*

In sum, the early results from CSSP indicate that the program is reaching the people who need it, is successfully helping them train for occupations that will keep them employed at good wages and is helping to meet the demand for skilled workers in Maine.

**2010 Report on the  
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**Introduction**

This report is being provided as required by the law establishing CSSP and instructing the Maine Department of Labor (the Department) to report on the status of the program and on any data that is collected as part of a strategy to evaluate the program.<sup>1</sup>

The start of the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP) in April 2008 came at a critical time. Maine, together with the rest of the nation, faced a severe recession with unemployment reaching 8.6% in August 2009, the highest rate since April 1991.<sup>2</sup> It has been an economic downturn that has lasted longer than any of the previous four recessions.<sup>3</sup> At a time when laid off and low income workers have been unlikely to find sustainable new employment, CSSP has provided an opportunity for them to train for good paying jobs that are in demand in Maine. As we emerge from this difficult period, these workers are graduating with new skills that Maine employers need.

CSSP is a program in its infancy. This report offers very early findings: who is participating in the program, how their career choices match up with Maine's economic needs, what are participants' projected earnings, what is CSSP's completion rate (thus far) compared to other students', and how have graduates fared in this contracted economy. Over time, we hope this evaluative process will provide rich data that will help drive continual program improvement and provide insight into how to best help low wage workers forge well-paying career paths while meeting Maine's demand for skilled workers.

**Background**

Established with bipartisan support by the Maine Legislature in 2007, CSSP provides support to adults with income below 200% of the federal poverty level to help them attend postsecondary education and training programs.<sup>4</sup> CSSP assists with essentials such as tuition and fees not otherwise covered by financial aid, books and supplies, transportation, child care and, for those with income below 125% of the poverty level, a small stipend equal to one-third of the

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<sup>1</sup> 26 M.R.S.A. § 2033(10).

<sup>2</sup> Dana Evans, "The Maine Labor Market: Trends and Issues" (Center for Workforce Research and Information, Maine Department of Labor, September 2009) (<http://www.maine.gov/labor/lmis/pubs.html>) 23 Jan. 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Workforce Research and Information, Maine Department of Labor, "Tracking the Recession" (<http://www.maine.gov/labor/lmis/recession.html>) 23 Jan. 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Public Law 2007, ch. 352.

average unemployment benefit -- \$510 per month in fiscal year 2009. CSSP was established to help meet employers' needs for skilled labor. Thus, to be eligible for the program, workers must be training for a skilled occupation that has been identified by the Department of Labor as being in demand in Maine.

CSSP is funded by the Competitive Skills Scholarship Fund, a state fund financed by contributions from employers, the cost of which is offset from their unemployment insurance (UI) taxes. The same legislation that created the fund also provided 67 million over 2 years in additional UI tax reductions to employers. Funds for the Competitive Skills Scholarship Fund provided CSSP with \$2.65 million in state fiscal year 2009.

CSSP opened its doors in April 2008, when funding for the program first became available. Administered by Maine's Career Centers, the program was immediately overwhelmed with applications and stopped taking new applications in order to assure the program remained within its budget. The program quickly filled, with 365 participants enrolled by December 31, 2008. As a result of this overwhelming demand, the program now opens for new applications only annually between March 30<sup>th</sup> and April 15<sup>th</sup>. Eligible applicants are chosen by random selection to fill any openings in the program in their region. In the 2009 application period, Maine's CareerCenters received 750 applications for the 100 openings that were available.

To help meet the demand, the Department created a parallel program, "Recovery CSSP," using funds from the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to create an additional 100 openings. Under the ARRA, Recovery CSSP participants must be receiving unemployment benefits, must complete their training by June 2011, and must be training for occupations in health care, information technology, energy, and green energy.

By September 30, 2009, 475 people had enrolled in regular CSSP and another 81 were enrolled in Recovery CSSP.

### **Economic context**

The high demand for a program like CSSP is not surprising given Maine's economic context. Over 30,000 payroll jobs have been lost in Maine since the beginning of 2008 and the number of Maine workers estimated to be officially unemployed is 55,000 or 8.3% of Maine's labor force at the end of 2009. Unlike in most previous recessions where laid off workers were recalled by their previous employers, labor market analysts agree that most job losses during this downturn will be permanent. Affected workers must now seek out new opportunities as the economy improves. They are discovering that a good paying job in Maine today is far more likely than in the past to require a postsecondary education.

Traditional industries such as wood product manufacturing, textile mills and footwear manufacturing that once dominated the Maine economy and gave identities to many Maine

communities shed over 6000 jobs between 2000 and 2008 and thousands more jobs in the 20 years prior. Even relatively modern industries such computer and electronic manufacturing lost 3500 jobs between 2000 and 2008. Large employment changes are not limited to manufacturing industries. MBNA, a large banking and credit card company entered Maine in the early 1990's and quickly set up impressive infrastructure across the state for the operation of call centers employing over 4000 customer service workers. Changes in MBNA management and business strategy resulted in major workforce reductions and facility closings after a 10 year run.

Job losses in traditional manufacturing industries have been more than offset by gains in broad service industry categories including business and professional services (+4,542), education and health services (+18,892) and leisure and hospitality (+4,055) between 2000 and 2008.

Such profound shifts in the employment structure of the Maine economy do not occur without extraordinary costs for individuals and communities. Transferring the skills and experience gained in one employment setting to the next is neither simple nor inexpensive. Further illustration of these structural shifts shows up in occupational projections for 2006 to 2016. Among the jobs with largest projected net job losses are stock clerks and order fillers (-680), electrical and electronic equipment assemblers (-329), team assemblers (-267) and cashiers (-222). In contrast, occupations with the largest projected net job growth include registered nurses (+2,997), customer service representatives (+1,332), business operations specialists (+533) and network and data communications analysts (+376). Educational preparation, skills sets, work environments and job performance expectations are fundamentally different for these occupations over those reporting employment declines. A recent report by the Center for Workforce Research and Information, Maine Department of Labor showed that high wage/high growth jobs will be filled by workers with a postsecondary education.

Thus, high demand for CSSP's assistance in pursuing postsecondary education reflects Maine's new economic reality. Both the participants and Maine's economy need programs like CSSP to be successful in helping workers complete their postsecondary programs.

### **Evaluating CSSP – Progress and Methodology**

Maine law requires that the Department develop a strategy for evaluating CSSP that measures the impact of CSSP over time, including the value of compensation earned by participants, the impact on the unemployment compensation trust fund, the impact on productivity and performance for skilled workers and the impact on meeting the demand for skilled workers in the state.<sup>5</sup> The Department is developing that strategy and is excited to be retrieving very early data from the program.

In particular, a telephone survey of the first group of 62 participants who had completed

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<sup>5</sup> 26 M.R.S.A. § 2033(10)



or otherwise separated from CSSP program by June 30, 2009 has been conducted to find out how they are faring. In addition, the Department's Center for Workforce Research and Information (CWRI) has identified a cohort of 380 participants in June 2009 and, using both case management data and data from the unemployment compensation system, has been able to paint a picture of the demographics of participants, including work history, history of unemployment receipt, and earnings history. These data will serve as a baseline as the Department follows this group through their education and training programs and into their careers. We have also benefited from a written survey of participants conducted by Professor Luisa Deprez of the University of Southern Maine and Professor Sandy Butler of the University of Maine in cooperation with the Department seeking to obtain both quantitative and qualitative information on the impact of CSSP on participant's lives and their ability to pursue postsecondary education.

### **Demographics: who is CSSP assisting?**

CSSP was intended by the legislature to reach low-income workers who were likely to have a history of receiving unemployment compensation and who need the support of CSSP to succeed in gaining skills for better, more stable career paths. The data indicates that CSSP is reaching this intended population.

CWRI analyzed information from both unemployment records and case management data for about 380 CSSP participants enrolled in June 2009. Their data shows that a typical CSSP participant would be a woman in her thirties in a household with two or three members struggling to get by on low income from inconsistent employment. Sixty-seven percent of CSSP participants are female; their average age is 35; the average number of people in a CSSP household is 2.3; 34% of participants are single parents.

In analyzing the income and unemployment history of this cohort of CSSP enrollees, CWRI found

- Over 60% of enrollees had household income below 100% of the poverty level (\$14,570 annually for a household of two) in the month before they applied for CSSP, well below the eligibility limit for the program of 200% of the poverty level.
- 66% were unemployed at the time of application.
- The most recent annual wages for 86% of enrollees were less than \$28,621 and 53% had wages below \$11,201.
- 65% had experienced at least one 3 month period with no wages over the previous 5 years. This was in addition to any unemployment they faced in the most recent quarter.
- Almost one-third (30%) had held 4-6 different jobs in the past five years and another 37% had held 2-3 different jobs during that time.
- The average hourly wage for the most recent wages of enrollees was \$10.58, well below the statewide average hourly rate of \$17.50
- 72% had filed for unemployment compensation in the past – 62% within the past 5 years.

- One-third were presently receiving unemployment insurance.

In a separate survey of CSSP participants, Butler and Deprez found that more than 60% of the 156 respondents had none of the job benefits they were asked about on the survey - no health or dental benefits for themselves or their family, no paid vacation or sick leave, and no pension or retirement benefit.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, CSSP is reaching people who are struggling. Most have lost their jobs and have coped with an unstable labor market, low wages and periods of unemployment. It is fair to say that they would have serious financial barriers to completing a training or education program but for CSSP.

### **What education and training programs are CSSP participants engaging in?**

CSSP participants are in a variety of programs ranging from short term certificate programs to four-year degree programs. On September 30, 2009, of the 475 enrollees who had ever enrolled in CSSP:

- 61 (13%) were enrolled in developmental courses in the adult education system.
- 135 (28%) were enrolled in certificate or one year degree programs in approved educational institutions.
- 228 (48%) were enrolled in two year degree programs, primarily in the Community College or University of Maine systems.
- 126 (26%) were enrolled in 4 year degree programs, mostly in the University of Maine System.

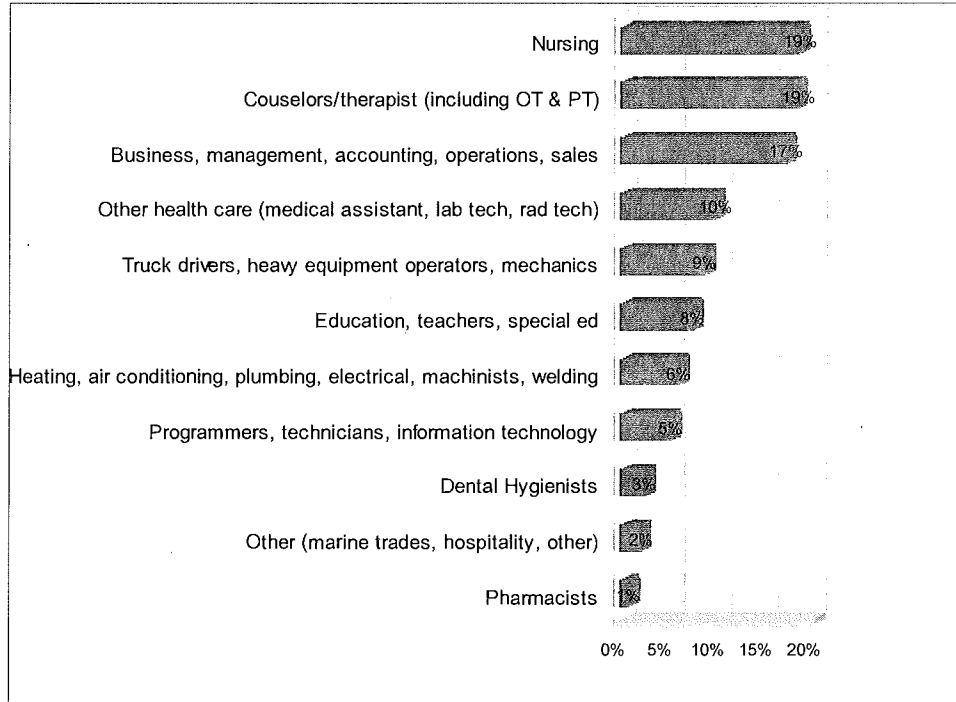
Many participants in developmental courses were simultaneously in courses providing credit toward their certificate or degree. (For this reason the sum of the percentages above exceeds 100).

The chart below shows that the education and training programs that participants are engaged in are also varied, with health care and business professions most dominant.

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6 Sandra Butler and Luisa Deprez, Draft Report. (Unpublished 2009).

## Occupations for which CSSP participants are training, September 2009 (n=475)



### Are CSSP enrollees gaining the Skills Needed in Maine's Economy?

CSSP was designed by the Legislature to help participants prepare for high wage, skilled jobs that are in demand by employers in Maine. Thus, to be eligible for CSSP, an enrollee must be training for an occupation that has an average wage above the median (\$14.28 per hour for 2008-2009) and is projected by CWRI to be in demand in Maine. A list of high wage in demand occupations is generated bi-annually by CWRI, reviewed by the Maine Jobs Council and approved by the Commissioner of Labor. The participant must choose an occupation from this list. Although these criteria help assure that CSSP is meeting the needs of Maine's employers, further comparison of CSSP participants' occupational choices with job demand is helpful. The choice of an occupational goal by participants involves many factors including what education and training programs are being offered in the person's area, how much time they feel they can devote to the effort, and their individual skills and interests. It is therefore worthwhile to analyze the extent to which the career choices of CSSP participants reflect the job market.

The following chart compares the most frequently chosen occupations of CWRI's cohort of 380 CSSP enrollees with projected job growth and job openings in those occupations in Maine. In some occupations (for example, truck driving) projected growth of the occupation may be small, while projected annual job openings are large. This reflects the extent to which people are expected to leave or retire from the occupation, creating a significant demand for replacement workers. Thus, CSSP enrollees are preparing to meet the needs of both growing industries and industries that need newly trained replacement workers.

Top 14 occupations chosen by CSSP enrollees compared to expected growth and job openings in Maine				
Occupation	Number of CSSP enrollees	Percent of sample	Projected percentage job growth (2006-2016)	Projected average annual openings (2006-2016)
Registered Nurse	72	19%	21.3%	532
Truck Driver, Heavy & Tractor Trailer	32	8%	3%	246
Mental Health Counselor	15	4%	25.6%	21
Mental Health & Substance Abuse Social Worker	14	4%	19.3%	71
Radiologic Technician	14	4%	20%	37
Elementary School Teacher, Except Special Education	12	3%	2.9%	159
General and Operations Manager	12	3%	-4.7%	209
Computer Support Specialist	9	2%	5.2%	61
Bookkeeping, Accounting, and Auditing Clerk	8	2%	6.2%	177
Dental Hygienist	8	2%	20.3%	39
Accountant	7	2%	10.8%	113
Child, Family, & School Social Worker	6	2%	9.3%	65
Heating & Air Conditioning Mechanic	6	2%	7.8%	49
Medical and Clinical Laboratory Technician	6	2%	18.5%	25

For the most part the above chart indicates that the job market is, in fact, a driving factor in CSSP participant choices. Of particular note, the popularity of training in health care professions reflects Maine's very high projected demand in the industry.

### **Will CSSP participants be better off after their training and education?**

The benefits of postsecondary education and training are both tangible and intangible. For low-income adults with a history of low paying, often inconsistent work, the financial and social benefits are magnified. If CSSP participants succeed, their earnings will, on average, more than double as their confidence and self-esteem grows.

For the occupations chosen by the 380 CSSP participants in CWRI's cohort,

- The average hourly wage in occupations selected by participants is projected to be \$23.03 or \$47,902 annually for a full time worker.
- This average increase of \$12.45 per hour over their most recent average wage would more than double their income.

In addition, most could expect health coverage and other benefits in their new occupation at a level never experienced before. They will enjoy life squarely in the middle class.

The intangible benefits of education and training are equally important. In the survey of CSSP participants administered by Deprez and Butler, participants were asked how participation in postsecondary education affected their feelings about themselves and their relationships with family members. Here are some of their responses:

*Greatly enhanced my ability to envision a bright future. Increased my self-esteem. Stretched me—helped me grow, try new things, be more adventurous—willing to accept new challenges. (45-year-old female studying social work)*

*It made me realize I still have a long life ahead of me and it is never too late. (26-year-old male studying computer information systems)*

*I realize I'm capable of attending school at the age of 45. I feel more secure with myself. I am enjoying the challenges, sense of accomplishment. It feels great to have a goal to work towards, something just for me, personal growth. (46-year-old female studying leadership and organizational skill to work in human resources)*

*It has validated that I am an intelligent hard-working individual. Losing a long term job does a real number on your self-esteem—you lose your purpose. (51-year-old female studying business and computer applications).*

*For my 2 girls, they realize that it is very important to get their education right after high school but they also realize that I am a strong person and they admire my determination to make a better for life for them. (38-year-old female studying nursing).*

*I believe attending college has given my children an example to follow. I strive for excellence and have a 4.0 average. Now my youngest son has a goal to get straight A's. (36-year-old female studying dental hygiene)*

For adults struggling with a history of low wage work and unemployment, the education and training that CSSP supports brings a new quality of life to the people it assists and, often, heightened aspirations for their children.

### **Early Data and Experiences: Does CSSP Make a Difference?**

The true test of CSSP's success is in how participants fare compared to similarly situated students without the benefit of CSSP. Do they graduate? Do they find jobs in their chosen occupation? What do they actually earn? With only 21 months of CSSP's operation, an “apples-to-apples” comparison of CSSP participants with their peers is not yet possible. Nevertheless, it is important to take the time to put CSSP's early experience in the context of national and state data for postsecondary students generally, and low income adult students in particular.

### **Are CSSP participants staying in school?**

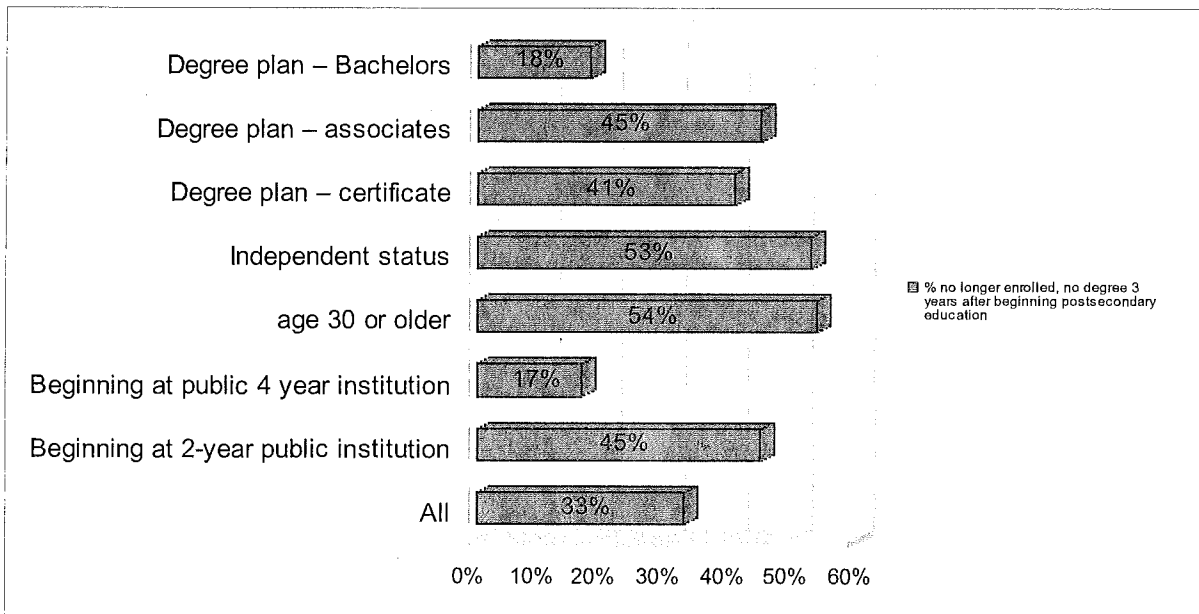
Statistically, postsecondary students with demographics similar to CSSP participants' do not have high graduation rates. In a longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of students who began postsecondary education in the 2003-2004 school year, 33% no longer were enrolled anywhere in school three years later and had also not attained a degree or certificate.<sup>7</sup> The risk of dropping out is even greater for adult students like those in CSSP. Generally, older students, those with low income, those attending a two year institution and those seeking an associates degree or less have even greater problems completing their programs.<sup>8</sup> In the NCES study, over half of those over 30 were no longer enrolled after three years. Similarly, over 40% of those seeking an associates degree or certificate had not earned their credential and were not enrolled.

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7 Lutz K. Berkner, and Susan P. Choy, “Descriptive Summary of 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Three Years Later;” Table 4.1. (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2008.) (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007041.pdf>) 1 Jan. 2010. These numbers include not only those who have dropped out but also those who have “stopped out” -- taken a break from school for a period of time and then returned.

8 Lisa Hudson, Gregory Kienzl, and Juliet Diehl. “Students Entering and Leaving Postsecondary Occupational Education: 1995-2001.” (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2007.) (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007041.pdf>) 1 Jan. 2010.

**Nationally, percent of students beginning postsecondary education in 2003-2004 who were no longer enrolled and did not have a degree in June 2006, by demographic characteristic.**



Source: Berkner and Choy, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education

There is little reason to think that Maine's experience is significantly better than the national picture. In Maine, only 29% of students seeking Associates degrees graduate within three years. For students in Maine seeking Bachelors degrees, 58% graduate within six years.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, early evidence from CSSP indicates a much lower drop-out rate. Of the 380 CSSP participants who had enrolled between April 1, 2008 and June 30, 2009 only 8 (2.1%) had separated from CSSP without graduating by June 2009. Telephone interviews of these participants indicate that they left either to take a full time job or because of personal or family health problems. Although it is too early to obtain a complete picture of the rate at which CSSP participants complete their programs, this low drop-out rate provides an early indication that CSSP is working to keep students in school.

<sup>9</sup> National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. ([www.higheredinfo.org](http://www.higheredinfo.org)) 1 Jan. 2010. Other data shows a 36% graduation rate in Maine from two year institutions within three years, with another 9% enrolling in a four year institution in their third year. Peter T. Ewell and Patrick J. Kelly, "State-Level Completion and Transfer Rates: Harnessing a New National Resource" (Draft), Table 2. (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems., September 2009) (<http://www.nchems.org/pubs/docs/NCHEMS%20NSC%20Draft%20Report%20September%202009.pdf>) 1 Jan. 2010.

## **Are our early CSSP graduates finding jobs?**

As of June 2009, 54 CSSP participants had graduated from their programs and entered an abysmal labor market. These graduates from the first year of CSSP's operation represent people in short term programs or people who had begun their programs before enrolling in CSSP. We are pleased to report that by January 2010,

- 90% (49) were employed
- 70% (38) were employed full-time, 34 in their field of study
- 20% (11) were employed part-time, at least 6 in their field of study.

Given the short time between their graduation and the time of our follow-up, these data are in the range one would expect. By comparison, one study showed that among those who had graduated with bachelors degrees in 1992-1993, 76% were employed by April 1994.<sup>10</sup> Another study of students beginning their postsecondary education in 1995-1996 found that 87% of those who obtained an occupational certificate or degree were employed in 2001.<sup>11</sup> In light of the distressed economy faced by CSSP's graduates, the initial 90% employment rate is hopeful.

Initial wages for CSSP graduates also are hopeful. Among those employed full-time, the average wage was \$14.93 per hour -- \$4.35 above the average wage of CSSP participants before they entered CSSP. As this sample of graduates is disproportionately represented by participants in short term training programs, it is fair to expect that the average wage on job entry for CSSP graduates will increase over the next few years as more of those pursuing associates or bachelor's degrees graduate and obtain employment.

## **What do current participants say about CSSP?**

An additional way to find out whether CSSP is making a difference is to ask participants themselves. The survey conducted by Butler and Deprez of CSSP participants asked respondents to check off statements about CSSP that indicated how the program had affected their educational experience. Their responses show that for all but three of the 156 respondents, CSSP played a critical role in their decision to pursue their education or training program and/or their ability to succeed in their program.

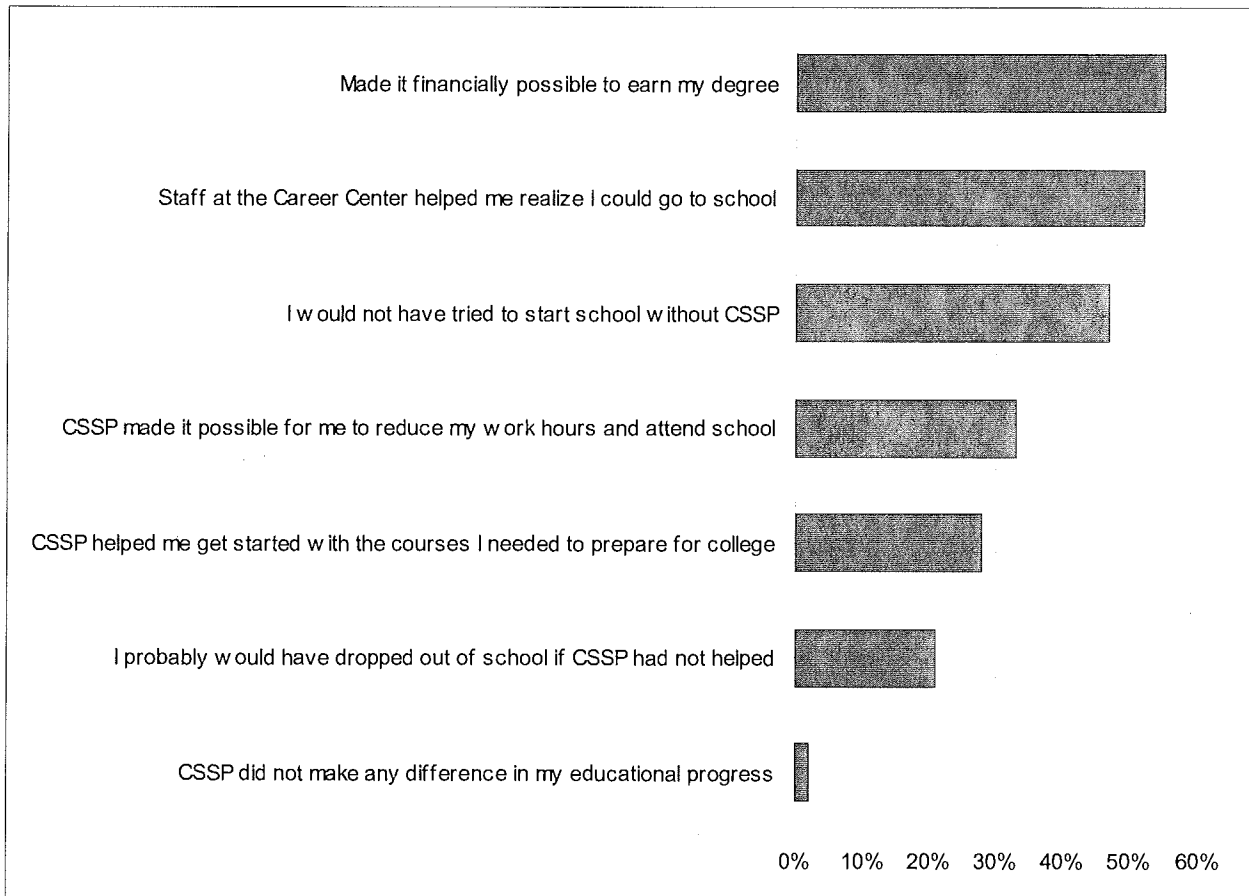
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10 Susan P. Choy and Ellen M. Bradburn, "Ten Years After College: Comparing the Employment Experiences of 1992-1993 Bachelor's Degree Recipients with Academic and Career-Oriented Majors," iv. (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, February 2008) (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008155.pdf>.) 18 Jan. 2010. This study does not distinguish between full and part-time employment. 76% were categorized in the study as employed and not also enrolled in school.

11 Hudson, Kienzl and Diehl, x.



**Impact of CSSP on educational progress.** Percent of CSSP survey respondents agreeing with each statement. (Respondents could check more than one).



Source: Butler and Deprez

The survey also asked open-ended questions, one of which asked them to describe how CSSP helped them (or is helping them) complete their course of study. Many stated that CSSP allowed them to concentrate on school in a focused manner rather than having to give their time and attention to a low-wage job. Said one student: “I am able to attend full time which lets me finish my degree in half the time resulting in me joining the workforce as soon as possible.” Another wrote, “I am able to maintain a five course per semester [schedule] as full-time so my goal of graduating 5/20/10 is real. . . . Could not have done as much or as well without it.”

The last question of the survey gave respondents the opportunity to write anything about CSSP that they thought was important and to offer suggestions for program improvement. According to Butler and Deprez, the overwhelming theme in the responses to this question was one of gratitude for the program. Many comments also revealed how important the program was to their success in school:

*“I thank god every day for finding my case worker and this amazing, life changing fund.”*

*“This program has and is giving me a chance to finally fulfill my dream of 40 years. I was discouraged thinking I had come to the point of 7 classes to be an RN and I would not be able to afford it. The CSSP program changed that for me.”*

*“Without transportation I would have lost my job and would have dropped out of classes for that semester. . . . Thank you CSSP!”*

*“Honestly, if it wasn't for CSSP I would not have been able to continue my schooling. “*

*“I personally could not have gone to truck school had it not been for CSSP. The fact that only four out of nine students (including myself) gained class A, B commercial licenses proves how hard the truck training is in Maine.”*

*“My case worker is an extraordinary woman. . . I think that CSSP is an incredible program that gives people a chance to believe in themselves again.”*

*“Thanks for everything, especially the eye-glasses. I can really see now. I don't have headaches at all now.”*

*“Just keep continuing the program. It is vital. . . .“*

These comments and many others like them indicate that from the point of view of participants CSSP is making a critical difference.

## **Conclusion**

Our early experience with CSSP has provided important information. We know from the huge number of applications for the program compared to the number of openings available, that it is in very high demand. Early data showing a very low (2%) drop-out rate compared to what one would expect from students with CSSP's demographics leads us to believe that CSSP is helping people not only begin their education and training, but also to complete it. Analysis of participants' training choices in light of projected job openings indicates that the program is successfully connecting people with training for jobs that are in demand in Maine. Further, although it is less than two years since the program began, CSSP's early graduates are finding jobs in spite of the difficult labor market they were entering. Finally, participant's themselves have provided important insight into the critical role that CSSP is playing in helping them succeed.