

Preface

This book emerged from my deep wish to better understand how women were faring as they navigated the workforce development system during the recent economic recession. Researching women's experiences in the workforce development system is not new to me. I had studied the New Jersey workforce system in the early 2000s as part of an evaluation of an innovative state Department of Labor and Workforce Development pilot program that gave the state workforce development system the latitude to implement a technology-enabled online learning program that provided education and training to a group that often did not receive it via the workforce system—working single mothers who were employed but not economically secure. The women in this program received computers, Internet access, and courses for a year to attain the education and skills to help them advance in the workplace. This project and research was very exciting to me in that it took a group of marginalized workers and helped them gain skills, certificates, and degrees in ways that were flexible and could be delivered in their homes. They were able to schedule their classes around their work and family responsibilities in an asynchronous learning environment. And the program did not just include access to education. The women also were placed with mentors and received individualized career counseling. Many of the women in the program saw a wage increase, completed their education, and gained self-confidence. They left the program excited about their ability to support themselves and their families and better assured they were on the road to economic security.¹

However, less than ten years later that same workforce development system, similar to workforce development systems throughout the country, was under intense pressure to meet the growing numbers of unemployed men and women that resulted from the recession. I began to think again about the women I had studied earlier in the decade, and the millions more like them who were trying to navigate the system. Were they struggling? Were they experiencing unemployment and back in the public system? I had a conversation with Patricia (Pat) Leahey, a Workforce Investment Board (WIB) coordinator in New Jersey, about my desire to explore the experiences women had in the workforce system, and she granted me access to conduct focus groups and interviews² with clients and helped arrange these for me in her local area. That first day of focus groups was sobering. Women shared their stories—how they got to be unemployed, what their hopes for the future were, and what it was like to be a client in the system. Some of what we learned was positive and encouraging; much of it was disturbing.

After I completed a first set of focus groups, Pat and I debriefed at our favorite coffee house on the Jersey Shore. She wanted to delve deeper into the stories that the women shared with us in the focus groups about what was working and what was not working. We heard about different stumbling blocks from the women we spoke to and how staff did (or did not) work with them to provide career guidance and planning. Pat wanted to try to better figure out what was occurring in the field with the purpose of trying to improve service delivery. She also saw what I was learning via the focus groups and interviews as part of larger evaluations the One Stop Career Centers—both locally and throughout the state—were engaging in to try to improve service. I suggested that I should go “undercover” as a client to try find out more. Instead of laughing off my sociological interest or running away from it for fear of what she would learn, Pat embraced the idea. She got approvals from her colleagues, and we put a plan together to do the undercover research.³ She was clear that she wanted me to do this to try to address some of the concerns that the female clients reported to us in focus groups, not to expose her local area or individual workers.

So we set ground rules and got to work. For instance, at no point in my undercover work would I take a spot from a client. Instead, I would only use services in which I could be an “extra.” This meant I would not meet one on one with a staff member (unless I spoke with a staff member after or before a workshop I attended) but instead would focus on core services and the One Stop Career Center’s classes and workshops. I would also not expose any workers by name. In fact, all of my notes would have no identifying information on the staff. I was focused on process and substance, not on checking up on particular staff members. After the participant observation I would again conduct focus groups and interviews with additional clients and also with the front-line workers. Looping back with qualitative research after my participant observation not only allowed me the opportunity to increase my credibility among the clients and staff I would interview, but also allowed for a richer and more comprehensive discussion with my new-found firsthand knowledge.

This book is the product of that research. It is not meant to be an exposé of the workforce system in which I went undercover. Instead I focused on delving deeply into the processes of the workforce system; identifying effective existing practices, along with areas in which challenges existed; and uncovering the clients’ and front-line workers’ standpoints and their perspectives on the workforce system. Indeed, there were several things that were working well. And when things were not working well, both the local area and the state Department of Labor and Workforce Development were eager to learn about those items and try to work to improve them.

In the pages that follow I attempt to represent the incredible opportunity I had to probe the workforce system at a time when it was facing immense pressures—when unemployment was very high, the system was pushed to its maximum, and individuals’ economic anxiety was profound. It is my hope that it helps to put a face on the workforce system—both for the client and the staff—so that we can continue to better understand a system that is needed in both good and bad economic times.