



# FOOD FOR THOUGHT



PILOTING AN INTEGRATED WORKFORCE LITERACY AND  
ESSENTIAL SKILLS PRE-CULINARY PROGRAM



# INTRODUCTION

PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs is a community-based, not-for-profit agency in Toronto with a vision to empower adults to learn and find work they value. Since its incorporation in 1998, PTP’s primary focus has been the link between literacy and work, especially as informed and shaped by the needs of adults with multiple barriers to learning and employment. Understanding and exploring this link—*one that is as challenging and as complex as the lives of the individuals it serves*—has led PTP to develop learning and assessment materials as well as an approach to programming that it has shared both locally and nationally.

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# ■ PROJECT RATIONALE

To expand its knowledge and experience PTP, in partnership with Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML), successfully applied for funding through The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) to develop and deliver an integrated workforce literacy and essential skills (WLES) pre-culinary program for marginalized adults. By integrating classroom components, practical application and employment services, this pilot project was designed to create a holistic, comprehensive learning experience with supports that would facilitate a seamless transition to further training or employment in the food services sector.

Our report provides a description of this pre-culinary pilot project and its outcomes as experienced by students and frontline staff based on a number of data sources including student file review; interviews with project personnel; student surveys and focus groups; a wrap-up meeting with project personnel; 3 month follow-up conversations with students and phone interviews with employers.

# ESSENTIAL PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Innovative interventions are needed that can effectively and efficiently help adults who have not completed high school and/or who have other barriers to learning and employment enter or re-enter the labour market. These barriers could include age, language, literacy, health issues, ineffective job search skills or time out of the labour force as well as external factors such as the uncertainties of the labour market. In an effort to promote program retention and improve work-related outcomes for this population, the project employed several inter-related programming and service provision strategies.

## Targeting an industry sector

Targeting a particular industry sector, in this case the food services sector, meant that *content* to be taught could be *contextualized*; it would be grounded in practice. The decision to target the food services industry was based on a number of factors. It is a large sector and includes a number of entry-level jobs such as food counter attendants, kitchen helpers, dishwashers and food preparers. According to the Government of Canada Job Bank, Job Market Report, job opportunities tend to be good, but there is considerable staff turnover. The sector also tends to offer jobs that do not have formal education or testing requirements. Additionally, job sites are usually accessible by public transit, and hours of work, while often long, can be variable, allowing for some flexibility in scheduling.

Choosing the food services sector also meant that PTP could take advantage of its own experience running the Teamwork component of its full-time Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program. Teamwork affords

participants the chance to “learn on the job” by taking part in organized on-going activities such as preparing lunch or running a snack shop. This “on-the-job learning” provides a context within which classroom learning can be applied and tested to promote the acquisition of Essential Skills<sup>1</sup>. PTP would also be able to draw on staff with experience directly related to the sector, for example, a registered nutritionist and a safe food handling trainer.

## Applying classroom learning in real life settings

Classroom learning about food preparation and food handling would be applied in an industrial kitchen where, for example, meal preparation would be approached as a real-time task. Ensuring access to a two week paid placement would further motivate and provide on-the-job experience.

**TARGETING A PARTICULAR INDUSTRY SECTOR, IN THIS CASE THE FOOD SERVICES SECTOR, MEANT THAT CONTENT TO BE TAUGHT COULD BE CONTEXTUALIZED; IT WOULD BE GROUNDED IN PRACTICE.**



<sup>1</sup> According to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, “Through extensive research, the Government of Canada and other national and international agencies have identified and validated key essential skills for the workplace. These skills are used in nearly every job and at different levels of complexity [which range from level 1 to level 5]. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change.” The Essential Skills are Reading, Document Use, Numeracy, Writing, Oral Communication, Working with Others, Thinking, Computer Use and Continuous Learning.

### **Building professional credentials**

Students could obtain a Food Handler Certificate (FHC), further increasing their chances for employment and enhancing the motivation to remain focused and committed to that end.

### **Focusing on employability skills**

Attention to employability skills would make the transition from learner to worker more likely and more enduring. Classroom work, practice sessions and self-assessment would all contribute to improved outcomes.

### **Connecting Literacy and Basic Skills and Employment Services**

For literacy learners, trying to transition from joblessness to paid employment can be a lonely and confounding experience. Yet clients face a possible service gap as LBS providers tend to work separately and apart from Employment Services (ES) providers. Clearly, there is an imperative for LBS and ES providers to dovetail their activities in order to better serve the needs of vulnerable adults. This project would bring together LBS and ES personnel, thereby creating an opportunity for conversation and joint planning directed towards improved service delivery to participants.

**STUDENTS COULD OBTAIN A FOOD HANDLER CERTIFICATE (FHC), FURTHER INCREASING THEIR CHANCES FOR EMPLOYMENT AND ENHANCING THE MOTIVATION TO REMAIN FOCUSED AND COMMITTED TO THAT END.**

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### **Providing meaningful supports**

Not only would a full range of employment services be provided to students, but access to additional personal support would be available by way of a PTP counsellor or referral to external services as needed.



**A SHORT, TARGETED TRAINING COURSE THAT COULD FACILITATE THE BUILDING OF SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE AND PROVIDE LINKS TO EMPLOYERS WOULD RESPOND TO LITERACY LEARNERS' NEEDS FOR FINDING A MEANINGFUL AND FEASIBLE PATH TO A PRODUCTIVE FUTURE.**

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Further, since food security can be a concern for this population, lunch would be provided daily to all participants.

### **Respecting real life limits**

Adult learners often face the conundrum of needing to upgrade in order to work, while needing to work to pay the bills, so lengthy upgrading programs are not an option. Rather, a short, targeted training course that could facilitate the building of skills, knowledge and experience and provide links to employers would respond to literacy learners' needs for finding a meaningful and feasible path to a productive future.

# THE WORKFORCE LITERACY AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS PRE-CULINARY PROGRAM

The Pre-Culinary Training Program was designed to run 12 weeks. It was delivered at FoodShare, a non-profit community organization and Canada's largest community food security organization. Committed to partnership, community development and the empowerment of low-income communities, FoodShare was a natural fit for PTP's pre-culinary project. FoodShare provided both classroom and kitchen facilities at its west-central Toronto location, which is easily accessible by subway.

The program ran **Monday to Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.** There were two classes running simultaneously, one for higher, the other for lower LBS level students. The LBS classrooms were also used for the food handling and employability skills instruction.



The program consisted of four core components:

- Literacy and Essential Skills Development
- Pre-Culinary Skills Development including training for a Food Handler Certificate
- Employability Skills Development, including 1:1 counselling support
- Employment Services including a 2-week paid placement

While the main teaching and practice components of the project lasted 12 weeks, ES delivery began during this period but extended well beyond.

The four program components were developed and coordinated to support the cultivation and enhancement of Essential Skills. As a whole and in its separate elements, the program was capable of promoting the use of 8 of the 9 Essential Skills. Lacking access to computers at the FoodShare site meant the program was not able to build on all 9 Skills.

**LBS classes, scheduled for 17 hours per week**, were planned to help learners master the concepts, language and skills that would allow them to function in the kitchen, gain the knowledge needed to be certified as safe food handlers, and practise skills that could facilitate successful job search and job retention. Learning culinary terms, health and safety concepts; understanding measurement, doing money math; and practicing interview skills are examples of activities that constituted participants' literacy learning. The nature and specificity of lesson content were determined and adjusted as instructors gauged and responded to learner needs.

Students received **8.5 hours per week of pre-culinary skill training in the FoodShare kitchen**. Students were exposed to terminology, techniques, procedures and ingredients as well as demonstrations. Equipment use and clean up were routine. Preparing daily lunch for



## **JOB SOLUTIONS, PTP'S EMPLOYMENT SERVICES PROGRAM, PROVIDED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES AND SUPPORT.**

all program participants and staff provided real time experience. Students worked on **baking skills a half-day per week**. Hands-on experience was the context for gaining practical knowledge of safe food handling. Classroom training for the **Food Handler Certificate** was provided by an experienced food handling instructor every other week in a two-hour session, alternating with the Employability Skills Development component.

The **Employability Skills Development** component consisted of one two-hour, participatory workshop delivered by an experienced facilitator every other week, so each student could receive 12 hours of workshop time. Each workshop focused on a topic (e.g., accountability) and a 'practice activity' that would connect it back to one or more of the 9 employability skills identified by the ESAT, which is the Employability Skills Assessment Tool developed by Futureworx<sup>2</sup>. ESAT

focuses on improving self-awareness and knowledge by addressing nine employment-related qualities or skills: motivation, attitude, accountability, time management, stress management, presentation, teamwork, adaptability and confidence. This was PTP's first time using the ESAT.

A part-time PTP counsellor/instructor managed the ESAT process and also offered **1:1 personal support** to students throughout the 12-week program.

Job Solutions, PTP's **Employment Services** program, provided employment services and support, initially by working 1:1 with each participant on resume building. Resume development started about half way through the 12-week program. Job Solutions also assumed responsibility for arranging the **2 week paid work placements** and assisting with ongoing **job search**.

<sup>2</sup>Futureworx Society is a community-based, non-profit organization in Truro, Nova Scotia committed to skills development and improved employment outcomes for clients. [www.futureworx.ca](http://www.futureworx.ca)

# PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

**PARTICIPANTS WERE SELECTED BASED ON THEIR INTEREST IN GAINING EMPLOYMENT IN FOOD SERVICES AND ON THE LIKELIHOOD THAT THEIR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS WOULD BENEFIT FROM A COMBINATION OF ESSENTIAL SKILLS, PRE-CULINARY TRAINING AND THE AVAILABILITY OF EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS.**

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## Recruitment and Selection

Word of the program was spread primarily through LBS and ES networks including Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS). The recruitment drive was targeted to those who wanted to learn basic skills, including reading, writing and math, and who wanted to work in the food industry. Three information sessions were held in early September. Interested attendees were invited to make a follow-up appointment at PTP where an assessment and an intake interview were conducted. Assessments were made using the CAMERA (Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment) tool.

CAMERA, developed by PTP, is an integrated assessment and curriculum system for adult learners interested in developing the skills they need at work. The CAMERA System employs real-life workplace documents and tasks to test and develop adult learners' reading, document use, writing and numeracy skills. Drawn from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's Essential Skills research, the documents and tasks together represent common activities in a wide variety of entry-level occupations and diverse employment settings<sup>3</sup>.

Project participants were selected based on their interest in gaining employment in food services and on the likelihood that their future employment prospects would benefit from a combination of Essential

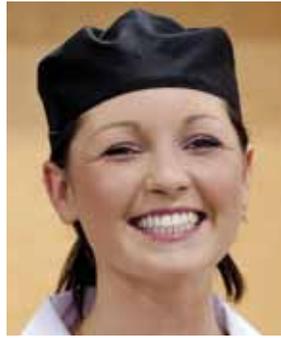
Skills, pre-culinary training and the availability of employment supports. Preference was given to those

- on income assistance - Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)
- whose document use, numeracy, reading and writing scores as measured by the CAMERA indicated that many entry-level workplace-related tasks would pose a challenge
- unemployed or underemployed.

Some of those selected identified lack of confidence or low self-esteem as barriers to their employment. All of those selected had relative stability in terms of housing, health and childcare; all were prepared to commit fully to a 12 week, full-time program.

Approximately 80 individuals expressed interest in the program, with some 65 attending one of three information sessions. Of these individuals, 49 were interviewed and assessed by a small team of PTP instructional staff and management. 34 were offered a spot in the program and 33 accepted. On September 23, 2013, 33 students started the program. Within the first week, 3 withdrew due to family circumstances, and 2 reconsidered their decision to attend. After several weeks, one more participant chose to leave the program. This means 27 students (90% of the project goal of 30) completed the program in December 2013.

<sup>3</sup> CAMERA was designed for use in adult upgrading programs where learners are interested in developing workplace-specific literacy and numeracy skills. CAMERA tests are a series of standardized assessments that show learners and practitioners which skills are developed and where gaps still exist. These tests also capture learner gains across the four domain areas of reading, document use, numeracy and writing. Trained assessors administer CAMERA tests at the start of learners' programs and at set intervals to give learners an opportunity to demonstrate skills and see progress.



### Student Profile

Of the 27 students who completed the program, 21 (78%) were female. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 57. The median age among participants was 43 years, and 7 students were age 50 or older. Other common barriers to employment included extended time out of the work force, ineffective job search skills, lack of Canadian experience and English as a Second Language (ESL) needs. Source of income for over half (n=17) of participants was OW or ODSP.

In an early survey of student motivations and expectations, students were asked to identify the reasons for applying to the pre-culinary program. The top five reasons identified as 'important' or 'very important' included both pre-culinary and basic skills. The top five reasons were: to gain the Food Handler Certificate, to learn basic culinary skills in a kitchen, to qualify for a paid work placement, to improve reading and to improve math skills.

Additionally, some suggested reasons such as: to increase job opportunities, to improve speaking and listening skills, to meet others, and to follow a dream.

### Staff Profile

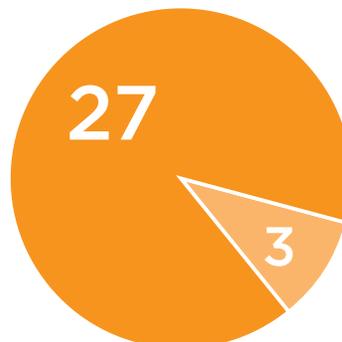
All project staff were highly experienced in their respective fields of expertise and all had experience working with marginalized adults. With the exception of the hands-on culinary instructors, staff were seconded from PTP's on-going programs. These included seasoned LBS instructors, some of whom had additional qualifications in life skills, safe food handling, nutrition and ESL, along with employment counsellors and job developers who were certified in Career and Employment Counselling or as Social Service Workers.

Only two PTP staff were assigned to the project on a full-time basis as LBS instructors. Three other staff were seconded on a part-time basis, either to teach food handling and employability skills, or to manage the ESAT and provide 1:1 counseling. Three staff from Employment Services were assigned part-time to assist with job counselling, job development and job search. More ES staff became involved at the end of the 12 week period. The hands-on, part-time culinary staff included a cook instructor, a baking specialist and a program/kitchen coordinator who was an experienced restaurateur with a background in community development.

Staff met bi-weekly for case conferencing.

## COMPLETION RATES

27 participants completed the program



3 participants left the program

Target number: 30

# OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCES

## PARTICIPANT RETENTION VERGED ON 100%.

### Program retention

Participant retention verged on 100%. All 27 who completed the program took advantage of ES support to varying degrees as needed.

### Literacy and basic skills learning

In terms of the LBS learning, CAMERA was the objective measure used to gauge change in some Essential Skills. Students did an initial CAMERA administered in week 3 and a final CAMERA (different content but same degree of difficulty and task distribution unless results from the initial indicated student should be tested at the next level of difficulty) in week 12.

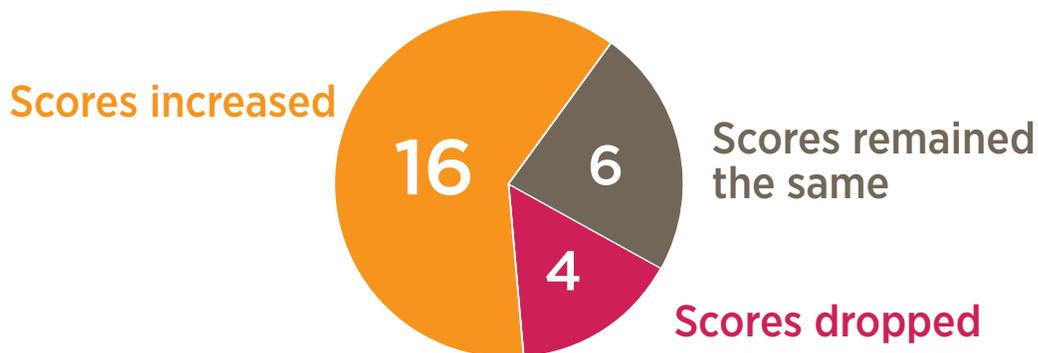
Following each test, students had an individual meeting with an instructor/counsellor to debrief. Students found CAMERA results to be clear and comprehensible. They could connect their scores to the work they did in class.

Reflecting on her LBS experience, one instructor observed that, “lack of confidence regarding one’s

ability to communicate in a common work language can be stultifying even when an individual has... many ‘positives’ in other areas.” Learning the code of a common work language, whether that takes the form of improved document use, stronger numeracy skills or better command of English, builds confidence and skills. The LBS classroom was the space where instructors “helped students to develop their own ‘coaching’ mentalities that enabled them to mentor one another and teach/train one another, both in the classroom and in the kitchen.”

And while there was no doubt students valued the CAMERA work, attaining the Food Handler Certificate meant having an industry-acknowledged credential. Recognizing the immediate value of the FHC, LBS instructors played a key role in supporting knowledge acquisition by working with both the food handling trainer and the kitchen staff to prepare for and review materials. So students’ success in gaining the FHC is in part a testament to both LBS instruction and the successful integration of program components.

## CAMERA RESULTS



26 of 27 students who completed the program wrote the final CAMERA.

**COMBINING LBS WITH PRE-CULINARY AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS HAD THE MEASURABLE EFFECT OF HELPING LEARNERS ACHIEVE THEIR FOOD HANDLING CERTIFICATION AND LAID THE GROUNDWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL WORK PLACEMENTS. CREATING A MEANINGFUL CONNECTION BETWEEN LBS AND ES VIA THE WORK-RELATED GOALS OF THE PROGRAM MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR PARTICIPANTS TO TRANSITION SEAMLESSLY FROM ONE SERVICE TO THE OTHER.**

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Combining LBS with pre-culinary and employability skills had the measurable effect of helping learners achieve their food handling certification and laid the groundwork for successful work placements. Creating a meaningful connection between LBS and ES via the work-related goals of the program made it possible for participants to transition seamlessly from one service to the other.

**Culinary practice**

The culinary component consisted of the complementary hands-on kitchen work and the FHC training. The coursework for the FHC is technical and dense, but students were very committed to achieving this certification and worked very hard to do so.

In the end, of the 26 students who sat the exam, 23 received their certificates: a very successful outcome. This certification is valid for 5 years and is a definite leg-up towards employment in the food services industry.

*“ At the end of the program my success is to get my Food Handler Certificate and start work. This will be my success.”*

*“ The food handling exam and certificate were most helpful for me. What I learned from that exam will help me in the workplace.”*

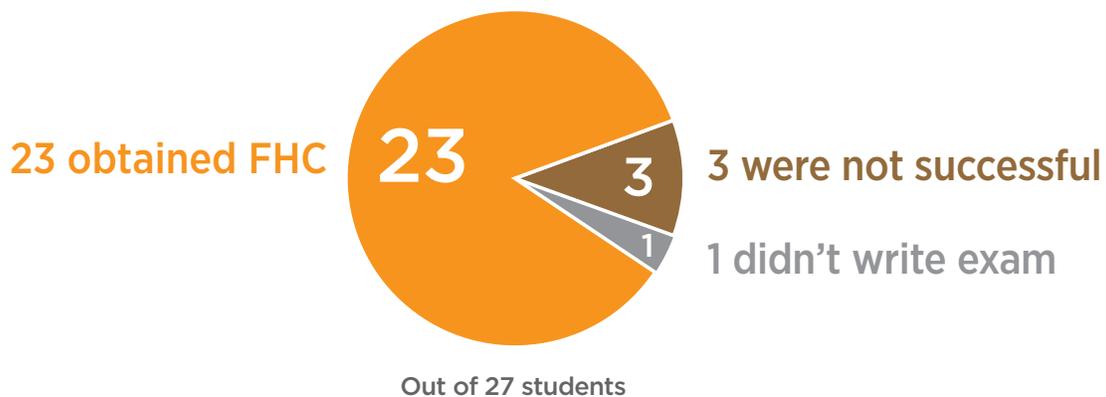
*“ This program was helpful to me. This is the first time I am going to receive a certificate which I can use to find a job. I am grateful. Thank you to all staff who came together to make this program a success.”*

*“ As a participant I was happy to be in this amazing program. Now I am a certified food handler worker and I have a chance to start my new career in Canada in the food industry.”*

In addition to attaining the FHC, the kitchen experience was highly valued by all participants. At every opportunity, students stated they’d have preferred more time in the kitchen beyond the 8.5 hours allotted per week. And for many, the experience reinforced their decision to move into culinary pursuits.

*“ This is the first step. Now I’m more interested in culinary.”*

**FOOD HANDLER CERTIFICATION OUTCOMES**



**OVERALL, THE ESAT PROVIDED OPPORTUNITIES FOR HONEST SELF-ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION, OPEN AND PRODUCTIVE DISCUSSIONS AND A TANGIBLE, LASTING DOCUMENTATION OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS THAT PARTICIPANTS COULD TAKE AWAY FROM THE PROGRAM.**

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**Employability skills development**

Many of the students came to the pre-culinary program having been out of the labour force for a time, or lacking experience in the Canadian context and so very much appreciated the content and workshop style of the bi-weekly employability sessions.

*“ It has helped me regain a sense of time management, employment outlook and responsibilities.”*

*“ I learned a lot about employability and positive thinking.”*

It was the ESAT that provided the framework for the employability sessions and made its own direct contributions as well. With the assistance of the program counsellor, all 27 students carried out ESAT self-assessments by completing an online questionnaire that presents the results in relation to the nine employability skills. Staff also provided student assessments based on behavioural observations, offering an external perspective akin to that of an employer's. Through these assessments, participants were able to compare how they see themselves versus how they are seen by others.

Individual meetings with the ESAT counsellor were the occasion for feedback on results and discussions regarding their implications. These meetings provided a supportive context in which self-reflection, positive reinforcement and encouragement to make changes could occur. Most students could see the benefit in the ESAT and appreciated the opportunity to review their assessments.

*“ The ESAT was a helpful experience. It's important to learn to see yourself as an employer would.”*

Of particular interest were the cases in which students initially assessed themselves at a lower level than did staff. The counsellor continues:

*“ We discussed possible reasons for this. We discussed how interrelated the skills were and particularly how low self-confidence can affect our actions and attitudes as well as how it can affect how others may see us. For the 6 students who participated in a second round of assessment, the major change in results was an increase in self-confidence in their self-assessments. Staff assessments changed very little, but their own self-assessments had improved.*

*Another interesting result was in stress management. Through discussion, we also realized that those who had been under significant stress during the program and had rated themselves as having poor stress management skills were able to see that since staff had rated them higher, it was likely an indication that they actually handled stress better than they thought they had.*

*Overall, the ESAT provided opportunities for honest self-assessment and reflection, open and productive discussions and a tangible, lasting documentation of employability skills that participants could take away from the program.”*

So while the full application of the ESAT was limited by program time constraints, it definitely added value and its potential is clear.

**Employment services**

Students were very keen to do a two week paid placement.

*“ I want to do the job placement and then I look forward to more study. PTP can give us advice or more preparation for me to go to George Brown College in culinary study.”*



**STUDENTS GENERALLY FELT PREPARED FOR THEIR PLACEMENTS AND THEY GAINED CONFIDENCE IN THEMSELVES AS BOTH LEARNERS AND WORKERS.**

*“ The job placement will give me Canadian culinary experience as I have none. I think I am inspired by this program as I have some experience from my home country and now this program and placement will help me get a job.”*

Part way through the 12 week program, an employment counsellor from ES began working with the students to prepare resumes. This process meant withdrawing students from class and, due to the program’s full timetable and demanding curriculum, it was not always an easy task to find just the right time. Tight program timelines also meant that job shadowing opportunities, employer visits and/or field trips could not be scheduled as hoped.

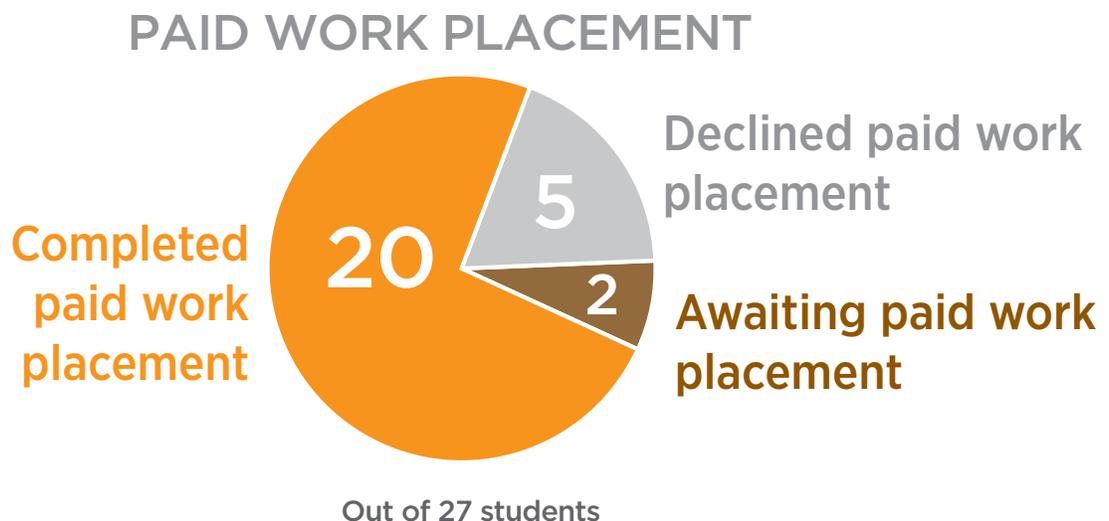
Job developers from ES were responsible for locating appropriate paid work placements. Paid placements were staggered at different times and with several different organizations, with some happening during the 12-week program and others later on. Only students who were doing well in the program and

who could afford to miss classroom time without consequences were selected for placements during the program period.

As of April 25th, 20 students had completed a paid placement. Two more were pending. All students who wanted a paid placement were able to have one.

Students generally felt prepared for their placements and they gained confidence in themselves as both **learners** and **workers**. Newcomers reported a deeper understanding of Canadian workplace attitudes and approach to organizing work. They all appreciated the opportunity to use their knowledge and practise their skills. The success experienced in placement is a testament to the program itself and in particular to the culinary component.

*“ I learned a lot, like how to work with others and organize myself in the kitchen. Also, what is required and when to do things—steps to take to make sure things are on time.”*





**EVALUATIONS OF THE PAID PLACEMENT EXPERIENCES, WITH RARE EXCEPTIONS, WERE POSITIVE FROM STUDENTS AND SITE MANAGERS ALIKE.**

*“ I learned that a barrier to work is being a slow worker.”*

*“ I got hands-on experience and experience with customers, plus a good reference.”*

*“ It was good experience working with others [having worked alone for 12 years as a caterer] and I got to use big pieces of kitchen equipment, like a mixer, and got a good reference.”*

*“ I learned to work with a team, to be independent, to be on time, and to prep for recipes.”*

Evaluations of the paid placement experiences, with rare exceptions, were positive from students and site managers alike. The manager of a site that hosted 6 students noted that their performances compared favourably to youth interns from another program that is twice as long (6 months). The main concerns expressed by site managers related to employability

skills such as communications and reliability, or to language limitations.

Beyond the paid placements, ES provided ongoing support for job search.

*“ I will look for work and PTP will help me with the job search. This program has had a positive impact on my future.”*

As of April 25<sup>th</sup>, 10 participants were employed (12 had been employed, but 2 have since been laid off). 9 of the program participants were in training or scheduled to start. At least 2 students have encountered personal issues that prevent them from working right now. ES continued to be available for those in need of employment support.

**The overall experience**

The program faced some challenges, chief among them were the cascading effects of short start-up and program length, which included impacts on the

**FINAL PROGRAM OUTCOMES**



25 of 27 engaged in structured activity

## A SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT, GREATER PURPOSE, CONNECTEDNESS AND HOPE WERE BENEFITS THAT FLOWED FROM ENGAGEMENT IN CONTEXTUALIZED, EMPLOYMENT-ORIENTED LEARNING.

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recruitment process, teaching time, scheduling and employment-related activities.

For instructors, program delivery was a demanding experience: class content had to be modified or abbreviated to support program objectives and to adjust for student need (for example, less math and more emphasis on oral communication skills than anticipated). Piloting a new tool (ESAT) added to the programming complexity. Staff commented that they would have liked more time to share learnings and concerns.

For students, having to juggle ongoing concerns such as children and health issues posed challenges whose demands are neither entirely predictable nor easily managed. Travel times and travel costs too were sometimes a problem.



But staff and students alike persevered and all thought the program, despite any challenges, was effective and worthwhile. **Student reviews were overwhelmingly enthusiastic and positive:**

*“ The program overall is awesome.”*

*“ It was well-organized. All the teachers acted in a professional manner. Whenever I had questions or I did not understand something, they were ready to assist. I wholeheartedly appreciated the program.”*

*“ My teachers take all my, and everyone else’s questions in and answer them with very detailed answers that help us understand. They work with me and everyone as much as they can. Amazing teachers in both classes and kitchens.”*

*“ It was a lot of help. This program gave me some idea of my future”*

*“ I have found this project most interesting and effective because it is an unbelievable mix of practice and knowledge.”*

Students were pleased with the combination of learning opportunities and felt it made a difference in their lives. The program’s relevance and sense of purpose gave coherence to their experience. They liked both the mix of training and the mix of students. Cultural and ethnic diversity encouraged an interest in learning about others’ cultures and traditions. A number of students noted the important social outcome of making friends. A sense of empowerment, greater purpose, connectedness and hope were benefits that flowed from engagement in contextualized, employment-oriented learning. There was a strong sense for all participants that this was ‘a complete program’.

# LEARNINGS AND LOOKING AHEAD

**PAID PLACEMENTS AFFIRMED AND ENRICHED PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE. FOR SOME IT PROVIDED A BRIDGE TO EMPLOYMENT EITHER IN THE FORM OF REFERENCES ACQUIRED THAT HELPED TO SECURE JOB OFFERS OR TO A DIRECT OFFER OF EMPLOYMENT.**

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The challenges encountered by this pilot project suggest some of the ways in which the integrated pre-culinary program can be refined and strengthened in future.

## **Improving Recruitment and Selection**

- Appealing to individuals with multiple barriers to learning and employment often means reaching out to those on income assistance. Engaging in a more active partnership with Toronto Employment and Social Services would provide efficient ease of access to this population and remove barriers to supports such as transportation or clothing allowances.
- Directly engaging culinary and employment services staff in the student assessment and selection process would allow for input from a broader base of expertise.
- Providing a one or two day orientation for selected candidates would provide staff a chance to get a better sense of applicants' interest, aptitude and ability to engage with others so as to identify those who might benefit more immediately from the program. An extended orientation would also help applicants confirm their interest.
- Developing a more comprehensive screening tool could allow for better assessment of job readiness. Also, an open conversation about the advantages

and disadvantages of being on income support would be useful.

## **Strengthening Communication, Coordination and Integration of Program Components**

- Providing a written program outline that also describes what to expect of the program and what is expected of students would ensure that everybody's on the same page.
- Knitting the largely part-time instructional and support team together by means of a comprehensive communications plan, including roles and responsibilities, would support greater integration of program components and strengthen common purpose.
- Scheduling more regular opportunities for all instructors and support staff to confer—possibly at the two, six and ten week mark— would allow for any concerns to be addressed and emerging insights to be shared collectively.
- More integrated involvement of frontline ES staff would ensure clients have a greater understanding of what the responsibilities of the job seeker are for achieving success and a chance to learn the skills required for independent job search. Early involvement would also pave the way for the shift from being a learner to becoming a client and future employee to take place with greater self-awareness.
- The change from being in a highly structured program where there was daily contact with peers and instructors to being a solitary job seeker, albeit with the availability of 1:1 support from an employment counsellor, can still be difficult to manage for participants. Organizing job search as a group activity might take advantage of peer support and the sustaining energy it can produce.

## EMBEDDING LITERACY LEARNING IN PROGRAM CONTENT IS AN EFFECTIVE MEANS OF HELPING LITERACY LEARNERS GAIN CERTIFICATION WITH EMPLOYMENT CURRENCY.

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### Enhancing Student Supports

- Transit fare for those without a transportation subsidy and phone cards to aid job search and to maintain contact once classes are over would make a difference.

### Responses to some of the challenges experienced may, in fact, have strengthened outcomes.

Because the time spent with the food handling trainer was limited, LBS instructors needed to coordinate with the trainer to supplement instruction. Work in the kitchen also emphasized health and safety while providing the context for applied learning. A higher level of integration, the opportunity to repeat and review content, using knowledge in practical ways increased exposure to and familiarity with essential material for students. Embedding literacy learning in program content is an effective means of helping literacy learners gain certification with employment currency. Literacy practitioners can support success through their involvement in presenting technical course material.

Resumes were written by an employment counsellor in consultation with the learner. The process occurred as a separate though related program component. Integrating the process and transforming it into an active group learning experience could be accomplished by adopting a workshop approach. Having the LBS instructor and the employment counsellor co-facilitate workshops could help create greater efficiency while providing a forum for students to rehearse their presentation as job seekers and to set realistic job expectations. The workshops could help students learn what it means to be independent job seekers. Information to help the job developer find appropriate placements could also be gathered efficiently. An opportunity for LBS and ES staff to work together directly might yield rich insights as to what constitutes, and how to encourage, job readiness in marginalized populations.

Paid placements affirmed and enriched participants' experience. For some it provided a bridge to employ-



**BEING ABLE TO REFLECT ON PLACEMENT EXPERIENCE CAN LEAD TO KEY LEARNINGS BOTH FROM THE STANCE OF TRANSFER OF HARD SKILLS AND THE APPLICATION OF SOFT SKILLS. SINCE THE COMBINATION OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IS DIFFERENT FOR EACH PARTICIPANT, THE ABILITY TO VARY THE LENGTH OF THE PLACEMENT FOR THE INDIVIDUAL—SAY FROM ONE TO FOUR WEEKS—CAN FURTHER INCREASE THE VALUE OF THE EXPERIENCE.**

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ment either in the form of references acquired that helped to secure job offers or to a direct offer of employment. For those with weak employability skills, reflection on placement experience can drive home the relevance of attitudes and behaviours. If all placements could be carried out before the end of the teaching session, there would be a structured setting for this learning and reflection to take place. Issues could be addressed even more strikingly if feedback from placement providers were incorporated. Additionally, the ESAT process itself could become more fully integrated and a greater place given to the role of the employability counsellor.

Being able to reflect on placement experience can lead to key learnings both from the stance of transfer of hard skills and the application of soft skills. Since the combination of strengths and weaknesses is different for each participant, the ability to vary the length of the placement for the individual—say from one to four weeks—can further increase the value of the experience. Additionally, those with significant gaps in experience or weak attachment to the workforce might benefit from a longer placement and thereby increase their chances of employment.

The more built-in flexibility there is within a program, the greater its ability to tailor individual components to meet particular needs and the more likely it is to serve the needs of those with multiple barriers to learning and employment. Another example of program flexibility that can make a difference is being able to offer extra coaching to those who do not attain their FHC on first try.



## CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges confronting this pilot project, participants reported extremely positive experiences. For example, when asked which parts of the program were most helpful, most students reported that all parts were helpful. They identify benefits that have a direct impact not only on their job search—having a FHC and the pride they take in this accomplishment—but on their daily lives as well (a number made a point of noting changes they have made in their home kitchens). Providing access to knowledge and work experience for learners creates positive effects in more than one domain.

The success of the program owes as much to the enthusiasm of students as it does to the hard work and dedication of a very experienced staff. Staff's ability to create rich learner-centered environments won them praise from students who often expressed their appreciation as a wish for a longer program. The lessons we have learned about program development, implementation, planning, organization, working together across program streams have been facilitated by their willingness to share their criticisms as well as their insights. Their work has helped us weigh the relative value of the various program components and to identify where greater emphasis might yield stronger outcomes.

An important lesson relearned is that the complexity of learners' lives must be taken into account when considering the kinds of interventions that would help marginalized individuals move towards and gain meaningful employment. A model that has built-in flexibility so that learner differences can be accommodated and where program elements can be modified in response to individual needs should be more effective than one that has no give. It is also the case that a hand-over of a client from LBS to ES services is less conducive to seamless transitioning than is one in which both service providers continue to be involved as may be needed to help individuals attain their goals.

### THE COMPLEXITY OF LEARNERS' LIVES MUST BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT WHEN CONSIDERING THE KINDS OF INTERVENTIONS THAT WOULD HELP MARGINALIZED INDIVIDUALS MOVE TOWARDS AND GAIN MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT.

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Developed in response to the needs of marginalized individuals, this pilot project—through the successes it has produced and the challenges it has identified—has demonstrated the strength of the integrated model of learning and practice. It has shown that essential elements of a viable workforce literacy and essential skills program are

- Targeting an industry sector
- Applying classroom learning in real life settings
- Building professional credentials
- Focusing on employability skills
- Connecting LBS and ES
- Providing meaningful supports
- Respecting the real lives of adult learners

This pilot configured these elements in a program consisting of four core components:

- Literacy and Essential Skills Development
- Pre-Culinary Skills Development including training for a Food Handler Certificate
- Employability Skills Development, including 1:1 counselling support
- Employment Services including a 2-week paid placement and links to employers

Short, targeted programs integrating the essential elements can be developed with different industry sectors in mind. They can result in a richer and more comprehensive learning experience where theoretical and practical knowledge gained in a supportive environment can be transferred to workplace practices confidently and successfully: they can improve access to the job market for jobseekers. The gains that workers who are learners make are felt not only at work but at home and in the community as well.

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## **Employers who provided work placements**

Toronto Christian Resource Centre

FoodShare

Mitzi's Cafe

Sistering: A Woman's Place

Aramark

Zemra Catering

## **Program Participants**

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