

The New Careers Program: A Retrospective

In July 1967, President Lyndon Johnson formed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate the causes of the urban riots that had plagued cities across the nation every summer since 1964. The commission's findings were published in the now-famous *Kerner Report*, which concluded that the nation was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal," and that a large proportion of Americans considered themselves permanent outcasts from the American Dream of opportunity and equality. In response, the Johnson Administration's "War on Poverty" was created to change the nation's social systems and repair the inequities of the past.

The New Careers program, which emerged as one strategy in that war, was perhaps the most daring and socially innovative government program to appear during this period. The program was the brainchild of sociology professor Frank Reissman, who in 1965 published a book (with Arthur Pearl) titled *New Careers for the Poor*. Reissman and Pearl argued that poverty resulted not from personal inadequacies or past injustices, but rather from a lack of educational opportunities that were essential for advancement in the new "credentialed society." Moreover, they observed that as a result of the technological advances of the twentieth century, the nation's need for unskilled labor had been replaced by a rising demand for workers in the fields of education and the social services.

Reissman and Pearl called for a national program that would simultaneously provide both employment in public and private human service agencies, and educational opportunities through on-the-job and college classroom training. Such an approach, they believed, would provide a career ladder for low-income and unemployed people to advance into professional jobs. In addition, because these individuals would themselves be drawn from the disadvantaged communities being served, they could act as a "bridge" between poor and minority communities and the social service agencies working in these communities.

Legislation for the New Careers program was introduced by Rep. James Scheuer (D-NY) in a 1966 amendment to the Economic Opportunity Act of



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New Careerists speak with former Vice President Walter Mondale before an October 2004 luncheon celebrating the University's New Careers program.

1964 (EOA). The legislation provided roughly \$3.5 million for programs to employ and train nonprofessionals for jobs in public human services, to be administered through the Department of Labor's Office of Economic Opportunity. In May 1967, the University of Minnesota became the first major institution of higher education in the nation to agree to participate in the New Careers program. Initially the program was administered through the Hennepin County Community Action Program. In fall 1969, the program was relocated to the University's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA), with School of Social Work professor Esther Wattenberg as its director.

In all, more than 200 people participated in the University's New Careers program during its two-year tenure. The participants, all of whom were unemployed or underemployed residents of Hennepin County, ranged in age from 22 to 59. More than half were ethnic or racial minorities, mostly African American or American Indian. Enrollees spent half of their workday employed as paraprofessionals at agencies that agreed to provide career mobility in the human services. During the rest of their workday, the New Careerists took college classes, primarily as students enrolled in the University's General College. By the end of the program, 105 participants had completed a 45-credit certificate

program (equivalent to one year of college), 22 had completed an associate in arts (A.A.) degree, and 2 had received a bachelor's degree.

The University of Minnesota's New Careers program became a nationally significant model. On two occasions, congressional testimony was invited about the program, once in 1972 before the House Select Subcommittee on Education and Labor, and again in 1990 before the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities. The hearings reaffirmed the success of the New Careers approach, and the importance of work-study generally as an effective model for worker training programs.

This past October, CURA and the General College hosted an informal luncheon at the Coffman Union's Campus Club to mark the inauguration of the New Careers program nearly four decades ago, and to celebrate and honor the many New Careerists who participated in the program. In her introductory remarks, former New Careers program director Esther Wattenberg recalled the groundbreaking nature of the New Careers program at the University of Minnesota—the only one of more than 200 such programs in the country that was hosted by a university—as well as its "innovative approach to breaking the cycle of poverty in the Twin Cities." David Taylor, Dean of General College,

praised the program for its emphasis on “what could be as opposed to what exists,” which he called a “hallmark of General College” and in the true spirit of a public land-grant institution. Special guest former Vice President Walter Mondale, who attended the first New Careers graduation ceremony in 1969, recalled the program as a “quintessential example of the principle of social justice—the idea that the nation has an obligation to use its resources to help everyone become a full participant in society and share in the American Dream.”

The most poignant remarks at the celebration, however, were the testimonials offered by the New Careerists in attendance. Most noted that the program had provided them with a unique opportunity to achieve basic skills, earn a college degree, and transition from paraprofessional positions to professional careers. Some shared the personal significance of their professional work, which had allowed them to give back to their communities and, in many cases, create new modes of service delivery to reach those traditionally underserved. Others discussed the significance of the New Careers program being located on the University campus, rather than in a church basement, as was first suggested. Not only did this mean that participants had to negotiate the University and learn how the system worked, but it also meant the University had to create new educational models to serve those whose life and learning styles were different from the traditional student’s, as well as new support systems—such as the General College’s HELP Center—for those who had been excluded from the opportunities of higher education and career development. Many recalled the importance of the social networks that arose from the program, the mutual



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New Careers program staff and participants (from left to right): Bev Stewart (director, General College HELP Center), Robert Shelton (New Careerist), Esther Wattenberg (director, New Careers Program), Charles Smith (New Careerist), Harvey Winston (New Careerist), Carol Batsell (New Careerist), Vince Hill (New Careerist), Kathy Kopka (New Careerist), Terry Wilson (New Careerist).

support and encouragement these networks provided to participants, and the lifelong friendships that emerged. Most significant, several New Careerists noted the intergenerational effect of the program by sharing how their experiences had become an inspiration to children and grandchildren to attend college or graduate school.

The New Careers program undoubtedly changed the lives of many participants, the agencies in which they worked, and the curriculum and counseling services at the University of Minnesota. More than 35 years after the issuance of the Kerner Commission Report, racial tensions continue to plague our nation and unemployment is at crisis levels in many inner-city areas. It is our hope that the story of the New

Careers program can inspire new efforts to confront poverty and frustration in our changing world.

For those interested in learning more about the history of the New Careers program at the University of Minnesota, Marilyn Peterson Armour’s “Alternative Routes to Professional Status: Social Work and the New Careers Program under the Office of Economic Opportunity,” *Social Service Review* (June 2002): 229–255, offers an excellent discussion. In addition, archival materials about the program are now available at the Social Welfare History Archive, which is housed at the Elmer L. Andersen Library on the West Bank of the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus.