

**INTERIM EVALUATION OF THE
TRAINING ONLINE PROGRAM (TOP)
(BUSINESS ACCESS/IN-HOME LEARNING SYSTEM)**

Submitted to
California Department of Social Services
and San Bernardino County

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UCDAVIS
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BACKGROUND

It is widely accepted that integrated programs of workforce development that target the poor and working poor will require more than fund allocation and the same, traditional approaches (Gatta & McCabe, 2006; Golonka & Matus-Grossman, 2001; Parrott et al., 2007). The reality of the lives of many welfare-to-work recipients—child care challenges, transportation issues, irregular work hours—often prevent them from taking advantage of classroom-based educational and job skill programs. Knowing this, forward-thinking states and counties are increasingly looking to technology in the hopes of assisting disadvantaged populations to overcome these logistical barriers and achieve greater self-sufficiency and security for themselves and their families.

Distance education has long been employed in K-12 and higher education; for the past decade, in fact, the rate of growth in the number of online students has far exceeded the rate of growth in traditional students (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Although many terms are used (computer-assisted learning, e-learning, distance learning) and the number of available models is enormous, education that employs technology in order to provide greater access and flexibility for learners has become a mainstay of academia and industry. Moreover, well-designed distance education modes of instruction have been empirically proven to be as effective as classroom-based learning for a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional student populations (Bernard, Abrami, Lou et al., 2004; Donavant, 2009).

In 2000, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) and the National Governors Association's Commission on Technology and Adult Education recommended the creation of conditions that favor online learning and the elimination of barriers that might inhibit people from engaging in distance education (ASTD & NGA, 2001). Other organizations that have traditionally invested in new solutions for low-income families (such as the Center for Law & Social Policy and the Center on Budget & Policy Priorities) have also called for creative, flexible, technology-based approaches to job training (Ganzglass, 2006; Parrott et al., 2007). As states struggle to meet federal requirements regarding Temporary Assistance to Needy Families' (TANF) Work Participation Rates (WPR), the need for innovative workforce development programs is even greater (Lewis, 2008).

Innovative Programs

For the past several years, a number of states have piloted (or are actively running) a variety of distance education programs aimed at workforce development and job skill training for TANF recipients. While the following list is not comprehensive, it includes a brief overview of several of the most high-profile and long-running of these programs.

New Jersey. In 2001, the New Jersey Department of Labor was awarded a grant from the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor to pilot a distance learning program for single working mothers earning 250% or below of the poverty line. The goal of the project was to determine whether online learning could prove effective in improving both the skills and real world earnings of low-wage working mothers. Results of the program were impressive, indicating high retention rates and an average annual wage increase of 14% for the 128 program participants. In addition, many participants went on to enroll in further training, including community college and other college programs. The program also proved cost effective, with evaluators able to compare the costs of a typical training course offered on-site at a technical school or community college (\$3,000-\$4,000) to the cost per participant of the same course via distance learning (approximately \$2,490).

Delaware. Following the success of the New Jersey pilot program, the Delaware Department of Labor implemented a similar program aimed at increasing employment skills for approximately 50-100 underemployed single mothers. Costing approximately \$3,500 per student, the program went beyond access to on-line courses by loaning participants laptop computers for the duration of the courses and arranging internet access for their homes. The women were also encouraged to use the computers as an educational tool for their children throughout their time in the program. Participants were assigned coaches to assist them in developing a curriculum based on their personalized assessment test results, although coursework generally focused on IT and computer-related training. Evaluations are currently under way.

Texas. Implemented by the Texas TANF Workforce Commission, the *Choices* program was run in conjunction with the private, non-profit company, Business Access LLC. The program provided distance learning opportunities to over 1,000 TANF recipients in the Dallas area between April of 2001 and March of 2004. Results indicated that graduates

of the program were three times more likely to gain employment in the first quarter after program completion and earned an average of \$1,118 more per quarter.

California. In Santa Clara County, California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKS, the state's TANF program), participants are now permitted to accumulate work participation hours via an innovative distance learning website developed to provide access to approved educational materials, such as web-based presentations, interactive training, and over 300 user-friendly podcasts. The program is open to CalWORKS participants who are enrolled in Adult Education, ESL, vocational, or college classes, but who need additional training or TANF hours. Individuals who are new to CalWORKS, transitioning between workforce activities, or who are enrolled in other activities (such as Job Club) can also utilize the website, gaining access to podcasts on topics such as social skills, parenting, cooking, budgeting, and personal growth. Evaluation is ongoing. Further information can be found on the Santa Clara CalWORKS website at: <http://calworks.helpscc.org/>.

The San Bernardino Training Online Program (TOP)

In September 2008, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Office of Family Assistance and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) sponsored a Technical Assistance Academy to assist counties in achieving higher work participation rates. Participating counties were encouraged to develop pilot programs for innovative strategies and solutions aimed at:

- linking customers to the skills and training they need to obtain employment;
- maintaining participation, and moving customers toward self-sufficiency;
- developing new opportunities for customers in the labor market; and
- reengaging sanctioned individuals.

CDSS requested counties to volunteer to conduct a distance learning pilot project utilizing the In-Home Learning System offered by Business Access LLC. Pilot counties were offered CDSS matching funds and evaluation services through the Center for Public Policy Research (CPPR) at the University of California, Davis.

The Business Access In-Home Learning System is a program designed to help people gain needed training through online access to training materials (www.business-access.com). Participants receive a laptop computer with internet access installed in their homes, and training courses are available in digital literacy, occupational skills, life skills, financial literacy, and general education through a customized secure online learning community. After successfully completing the nine-month training program, participants are allowed to keep the computers and to continue accessing Business Access courses for an additional three months. At that point, the participants are required to obtain their own internet access. Mentors provided by Business Access actively support participants in staying on track and accomplishing their goals.

Effective May 2009, the County of San Bernardino implemented the Business Access In-Home Learning System [known as the ***Training Online Program*** (TOP)] in a pilot form for recipients of the CalWORKs program countywide. San Bernardino's Transitional Assistance Department (TAD) joined the pilot program for several reasons. First, the county felt that distance learning has considerable potential to help its customers develop the employment skills and training needed to obtain unsubsidized employment. Second, TOP has the potential to mitigate the transportation and child care issues frequently experienced by TAD's customers, especially single custodial parents and those in rural areas. Finally, by reducing necessary travel for training, the program would also support both the county's "Work First" and "Green" initiatives.

The TOP pilot was designed to employ a quasi-experimental design in which project-related activities and outcomes of participants are compared to those of a "similarly situated" comparison group of eligible clients. According to the Letter of Agreement between CDSS and San Bernardino County, the final evaluation of the program will aim to isolate the effects of the pilot strategy on participants, and to answer a number of specific evaluation questions regarding "impact" and "cost/benefit." For full details on the evaluation design and data collection plan of the TOP pilot, see Appendix A.

Interim Evaluation

The purpose of the current report is to provide CDSS and San Bernardino County with an interim evaluation of the (ongoing) processes and preliminary impacts of the TOP pilot on Welfare to Work participants. The report will include updated information on participant selection and pre-program group comparisons, and interim results on key outcomes of interest—particularly the program's impact on Workforce Participation Rates (WPRs).

Participant Selection

In addition to creating groups of sufficient size in a timely manner, the primary concern of the sampling process was to mitigate against self-selection and ensure that client and comparison groups were as similar as possible prior to pilot initiation. Participants for both the Distance Learning (DL) client and comparison groups were, therefore, selected from referrals submitted by Employment Services Specialists at each district office through the office's Work Experience (WEX) coordinator. Although initially planned eligibility criteria were relatively strict, difficulties in identifying enough eligible clients within the narrow timeframe led the county to loosen the eligibility criteria to some degree. These changes included dropping the following criteria: at least 90 days of WEX participation, concurrent activity required to meet federal WPR standards, single custodial parenthood, and involvement in Community Service. Final criteria for participation were:

- participation in subsidized or unsubsidized WEX or Community Service,
- meeting the criteria on the TOP Pilot Referral Form (WEX 4.1, Appendix B),
- absence of participation/attendance issues,
- absence of language/learning barriers,
- absence of felony convictions, and
- completion of the Business Access orientation.

Although an effort was made to recruit clients using fliers and posters (which included the promise of a free laptop computer) few, if any, self-referrals were realized. As a result, staff were asked to review their caseloads against the minimum criteria for participation and refer individuals to the program. The goal was to identify at least 120 individuals as potential DL participants, and an additional 10 individuals as "alternates" who could replace participants who failed to complete the required orientation or dropped out during the first month. In all, 137 individuals were referred for the client group (duplicates identified and removed) and found to be eligible for the program. Referred individuals were contacted in a fairly random fashion and were offered places in the TOP pilot. All contacted individuals accepted the invitation and all but one completed the orientation (the case being replaced with an individual from the wait list). Within the first weeks of the program, two other individuals chose not to continue and were also replaced. (Drop-out cases will be tracked separately for final evaluation purposes). A similar

process was used to select cases for the comparison group (including the requirement that referred individuals meet the program’s eligibility criteria).

Final client and comparison groups broke down as follows:

- 120 DL **clients** (including three transferred in from the wait list),
- 3 who were initially part of the DL **client** groups but dropped in the first month,
- 15 wait list cases to be tracked as **comparisons**, and
- 123 additional **comparisons** selected as the first ones meeting DL program criteria based on a review of current caseloads.

Group Comparisons

Analyses of the demographic and background characteristics of the client and comparison groups showed no statistically significant differences in terms of region of county, age, ethnicity, number of children, education level, or pre-existing computer skills.

Table 1

Background Characteristics for DL Clients and Comparisons

		Client-Comparison Based on BA Data			
		DL Client		Comparison	
		N	%	N	%
Total		120	100.0	141	100.0
Ethnicity	African American	22	18.3	33	23.4
	Hispanic	69	57.5	58	41.1
	White	22	18.3	45	31.9
	Native American	1	.8		
	Asian	2	1.7		
	Asian/Cambodian	1	.8		
	Cambodian			1	.7
	Filipino	1	.8	1	.7
	Filipino/Japanese			1	.7
	Hawaiian	2	1.7		
	Japanese			1	.7
	Pacific Islander			1	.7

Gender	Female	113	94.2	138	97.9
	Male	7	5.8	3	2.1
Number of Children	1	51	42.5	60	42.6
	2	36	30.0	53	37.6
	3	26	21.7	19	13.5
	4	5	4.2	6	4.3
	5	2	1.7	1	.7
	6			1	.7
	8			1	.7
Age Group	Under 25	37	30.8	47	33.3
	25 to 34	45	37.5	57	40.4
	Over 34	38	31.7	37	26.2
District	Central	46	38.3	39	27.7
	Desert Region	31	25.8	49	34.8
	West End	43	35.8	53	37.6
Computer skills	No	80	66.7	95	67.4
	Yes	40	33.3	46	32.6

In addition, a comparison of average hours of workforce participation for the month prior to the program (May 2009) showed no differences between the groups (see Table 2). DL clients averaged 27.82 hours per week of workforce participation, compared to 28.90 hours for comparisons. Evaluation of the percent of client vs. comparison cases who met their WPR thresholds for May 2009 also showed no differences between the groups either initially or after attrition through October 2009 (see below) [$\chi^2(1, N = 261) = .55, p = .459$ before attrition, and $\chi^2(1, N = 237) = .70, p = .402$ after attrition]. Based on these analyses, the groups were considered comparable and additional comparison group members were not requested.

Table 2

Average Hours per Week of Work Force Participation Activities for Distance Learning Client and Comparison Groups in May, 2009 (One month prior to start of TOP)

DL Clients			Comparison Group			95% CI		Cohen's d		
<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (188.74)	<i>p</i>		LL	UL
110	27.82	10.22	129	28.90	7.04	-.936	0.35	-3.36	1.20	-0.12

Both groups experienced some attrition during the period of June through October, 2009 (Table 3), but attrition was less than 10% in both cases. Analyses revealed that sources of attrition were unrelated to the DL program and affected both groups evenly:

Table 3

Attrition for DL clients and comparisons through October, 2009

Reason	DL Clients	Comparisons
Employment	5	3
Death	1	
Moved out of State	1	2
Moved to another County	1	1
Began collecting Unemployment Insurance Benefits and was over income limits	1	
Requested their case be discontinued	1	2
Exhausted their 60 month time limit for CalWORKs assistance		2
Exempted based on change in eligibility rules	1	1
Total	11	11

It should be noted that employment is a positive outcome and that this outcome was somewhat more common among the DL clients. However, there is no way to determine whether this employment was related to the clients' experience with the Distance Learning Pilot program.

Interim Results

Data received from San Bernardino County included information on the demographic and background characteristics of client and comparison group members (as analyzed above), as well as WPR figures from May 2009 and October 2009 for both groups (i.e., whether WPR standards were met and the average weekly number of hours spent in WPR activities).

Questionnaires were planned for DL clients and comparisons in an attempt to determine computer use, skills, and comfort prior to and following the program period. These data would have permitted a further assessment of group comparability and a baseline for determining the “soft” impact of the program on factors that may affect employability. It became clear, however,

that a questionnaire that could provide objective, validated data on these factors (which would also be client-friendly and unlikely to pose a considerable administrative burden on the San Bernardino staff) was not feasible. Accordingly, a questionnaire that could tap these dimensions in a more qualitative way was developed for one-time, post-program administration. This questionnaire will ask about perceived changes in computer/internet use, comfort with computers, overall computer skills, and any computer “carry-over” to children in the home. It will be distributed to all remaining DL clients and comparisons in May 2010 and its results analyzed in CPPR’s final report.

An additional questionnaire was developed for San Bernardino staff to assess their perceptions of the program, its value for clients, and its impact on their jobs and workload. This questionnaire has been forwarded to San Bernardino administrators for review and distribution. A similar survey will be distributed after the program is completed to obtain updated perceptions on the part of staff members.

For this interim report, CPPR analyzed WPR data from October 2009 and the monthly DL activity data (provided by Business Access) through February of 2010. Analyses were performed excluding attrition cases and early dropouts. Results showed that 97 (88.2%) of the DL clients met WPR standards in October vs. only 85 (66.9%) of the comparisons [$\chi^2(1, N = 237) = 14.94, p < .01$; see Table 4]. This difference in favor of DL clients held for individuals who met their WPR standards in May 2009 and those who did not. These differences were also statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Table 4

Number and Percent of Distance Learning clients and comparisons who did and did not meet the Workforce Participation Rate (WPR) standards in October, 2009

	Yes	%	No	%	Total
DL Clients	97	88.2	13	11.8	110
Comparison Group	85	66.9	42	33.1	127
Total	182	76.8	55	23.2	237

To assess whether differences between the groups may have applied only to specific subgroups of Welfare to Work clients, analyses were repeated based on ethnicity (with all ethnic groups except African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites grouped together as “other”), client age category, number of children (1 or 2 vs. 3 or more), district within San Bernardino County, education level, and whether or not the client had previous computer skills. Looking within these subgroups, results indicate similar differences in WPR achievements between DL clients and comparisons. The exception to this was African American DL clients, who showed a slightly lower level of meeting WPR standards than did other DL clients and who therefore did not differ from African American comparisons in their level of meeting WPR standards. DL clients and comparisons within other subgroups, notably Whites, those in the Desert Region of San Bernardino County, and those with three or more children, showed differences similar in direction and magnitude to those found for the total sample, but these results did not reach statistical significance due to small sample sizes.

Looking now at the average number of WPR hours per week, analyses on October 2009 data also showed statistically significant differences in favor of DL clients vs. comparisons [$t(237) = 5.888, p < .01$; see Table 5].

Table 5

Average Hours per Week of Work Force Participation Activities for Distance Learning Client and Comparison Groups in October 2009

DL Clients			Comparison Group					95% CI		Cohen's d
<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (237)	<i>p</i>	LL	UL	
110	35.22	12.95	129	24.37	15.17	5.96	<.01	7.26	14.42	0.77

Ordinary Least Squares stepwise regression, controlling for client age, number of children, ethnicity, level of education, district, and prior computer skills, still indicated that DL clients had a higher average number of WPR hours than did comparisons. In addition, those with prior computer skills had a smaller number of WPR hours, on average, once the effects of client group were controlled. The addition of this computer skill variable into the regression equation,

however, did not affect the estimate for client group, and no interaction effects of “client by computer skills” were found—suggesting that the impact of computer skills was true for both DL clients and comparisons.

The final analysis performed for this interim report focused on the total number of monthly hours spent on DL activities through Business Access. These data only apply to DL clients, of course, so the analysis focused on those clients who met their October WPR standards vs. those who did not. As shown in the following graph, clients who did not meet WPR standards had a lower level of distance learning hours through the month of October, during which there was a noticeable drop in activity corresponding to their failure to meet WPR standards. It is interesting to note, however, that the level of DL activity for these clients rose dramatically during the following month—to a point above that of the other DL clients (i.e., those who *had* been meeting their WPR standards). Although these results have not yet been shared with San Bernardino for discussion, one likely explanation is that these clients became aware of their failure to meet WPR standards in October and therefore took steps (in the form of increased DL activities) to rectify the problem. If so, the availability of this readily accessible method of improving WPR-related activity levels may prove beneficial for helping clients overcome problems in meeting their responsibilities. CPPR’s final report will make note of whether or not these clients do or do not fail to meet their WPR standards at the next measurement point.

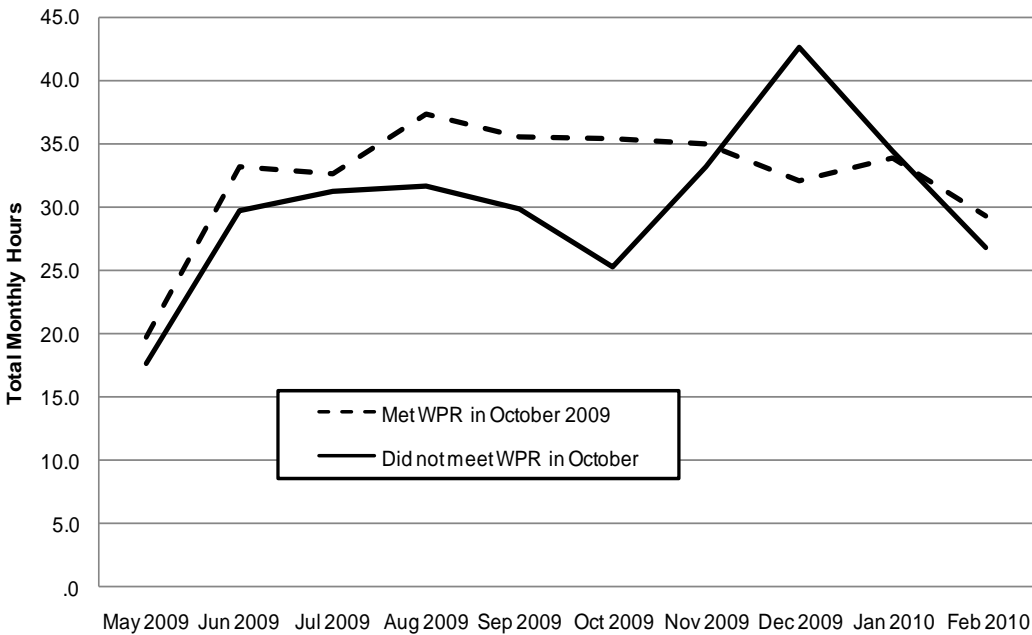


Figure 1: Total hours per month of Distance Learning activity for San Bernardino Business Access customers by whether WPR standards were met in October 2009

Looking Ahead

Analyses in the final report will be based on WPR data provided by San Bernardino County for May 2010 (i.e., after program completion yet during the time in which DL clients still have access to internet services paid for by Business Access). The county will also assist evaluation efforts by administering surveys to the client and comparison groups. Although the procedures for administering this survey have not yet been solidified, CPPR has developed an online survey tool for this purpose. As CPPR does not have identifying information on participants, it will be necessary for San Bernardino staff to ensure that participants access the online surveys using either assigned ID numbers or some combination of non-identifying information (e.g., date of birth, gender, city of residence).

Business Access will provide monthly data on online computer use by DL clients through the 12-month period of internet access through the BA system. These data will permit the analysis of trends over time for those who continue to meet WPR standards and those who do not.

Conclusion

Interim results for the San Bernardino County TOP pilot are highly positive and intriguing. If the current findings hold for the remainder of the study, the value and benefit of this innovative distance education program would appear to be impressive. Although it is always possible for interim result to be somewhat “time-bound” (in this case, for example, dependent on clients’ current levels of computer and internet access), the outcomes achieved thus far certainly warrant further study.

Among the most critical longer-term questions, of course, is whether participation in the program assists Welfare to Work clients achieve unsubsidized employment and maintain ongoing self-sufficiency. Such extended evaluations would be the most meaningful way to determine, more precisely, both the individual-level benefits of the program and its overall monetary value for the county and the state. Discussions of these types of cost/benefit analyses (which would involve gathering employment and wage data either from San Bernardino County or from state sources) were temporarily suspended pending the interim analyses provided in this report. With the realization of such promising results in the areas of workforce preparation and participation, we are eager to further examine the program’s effectiveness.

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APPENDIX A

San Bernardino County TOP Pilot Evaluation Design

General Design

The evaluation will employ a quasi-experimental design in which project-related activities and participant outcomes are compared to those of a “similarly situated” comparison group of eligible clients.

Data collection plan

According to the Letter of Agreement, the data collection plan must include:

- performance measures and methods of tracking individual and project success, and
- other evaluation parameters, such as surveys, methods of data collection and analysis.

Data will be drawn from

- existing automated data systems in San Bernardino County (and CDSS),
- the Business Access data system,
- an online, automated survey of participants and comparisons, and
- interviews with staff and administrators in San Bernardino County.

Where possible, existing automated data will be used for all analyses. Work participation measures that require file review and calculation will be restricted to outcomes specifically included in the Letter of Agreement between San Bernardino County and CDSS.

UCD will access, store, and analyze only data that are de-identified. San Bernardino County will be responsible for establishing a process for removing identifying information from data collected for this evaluation, for maintaining a key list for adding outcomes and survey information, and for forwarding information to UCD on a basis agreed to by both parties for analysis.

Individual-level Data

Data on participants and all members of the comparison group candidate pool that will be used in the evaluation include:

- **Demographic and background information from San Bernardino automated sources, manually extracted and forwarded to UCD in de-identified form**

- DOB (MM/YYYY)
- Gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Education level
- DOB of each child in home (MM/YYYY)
- TANF
- Number of months left on CalWORKs
- Data from WEX (4.1) Training Online Program (TOP) Pilot Referral Form
 - Computer skills (Y/N)
 - Employment Goal
- Geographical area within county

Please note that, although date of TANF entry was desired, this data was unavailable from the county.

- **Work participation activities from Business Access databases and from San Bernardino automated sources and files**

Included here are all activities engaged in for work preparation (training, job seeking, general education, etc.). These data will be used as “performance measures and methods of tracking individual and project success” at helping clients prepare for independent living. For participants, online training activities will be available from the Business Access database. Other activities for participants and all activities for comparisons will come from San Bernardino sources. A schedule for extracting this information will be worked out with San Bernardino staff, but will include at least three time points: once for baseline measurement, once for the interim report, and once for the final report. Details on what data are accessible and a schedule for obtaining these data will be worked out with San Bernardino staff and Business Access representatives.

- **Survey data on accessing training materials, use of computers in the home by clients and family members, employment goals, and perceptions of the WEX program (general satisfaction, problems encountered, suggestions for improvement)**

The surveys are critical for measuring client characteristics necessary for understanding the types of clients who benefit most from the TOP Distance Learning approach and for measuring certain anticipated side benefits of the TOP Pilot: changes in computer use and comfort, approaches to employment, self-reported computer skill levels, and family use of computers. The surveys will also provide a mechanism for obtaining participant perceptions of the program, problems, and suggestions for improvement.

The surveys would be completed early in the program and again at the end to assess changes. They will be conducted using web-based, online survey tools requiring only a basic knowledge of computers (so that they could be completed by clients themselves). The surveys will be developed by UCD in consultation with San Bernardino staff and made accessible to San Bernardino staff on their desktop computers. The surveys could be completed during office visits or through phone contacts by San Bernardino staff for both the participant and comparison groups. UCD will work with San Bernardino staff to minimize extra workload associated with the surveys and will explore the possibility of having the participant surveys be administered by Business Access as part of their regular interaction with Distance Learning clients.

- **Work participation rate information (from San Bernardino staff)**

This is a primary, required outcome (impact) variable. The evaluation is expected also to establish a dollar value for this outcome. UCD will clarify this expectation with CDSS and develop a plan for quantifying this variable in consultation with San Bernardino staff.

- **Employment, wage, and grant information from San Bernardino automated sources and CDSS (EDD data).**

These are primary, required outcome (cost/benefit) variables. The data will be sought from both San Bernardino automated systems and CDSS, which obtains similar data through the Employment Development Department. The CDSS data will be compared to the San Bernardino data to establish comparability and then used as secondary outcome information. These data will also set the stage for longer-term follow-up, if desired by CDSS.

Organizational Impact Data

Data on organizational impact (“on county staff, operations and administration”) will be obtained through interviews with administrators and interviews or surveys of other staff.

