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QUEUING OR CREAMING? WIN OR LOSE

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ABSTRACT

A review of the Work Incentive Program (WIN) provides insight into some of the issues and options confronting manpower planners and administrators. It becomes apparent that the strategies regularly utilized and reinforced by federal funding practices can clearly be labelled as "creaming." The "queueing" model is presented as an alternative decision-making process that appears more likely to lead to rational and purposive outcomes for manpower programs.

CREAMING

Creaming procedures are those strategies that select the "most workable" and "most readily placeable" candidates from among a pool for entry into a placement system while the least workable and most troublesome candidates are relegated to a "hold" position--in short, the "cream" is selected, or skimmed from the top.

S.M. Miller et al¹ argue that efforts to improve the condition of those at the top of the bottom strata of society (hard-core unemployed would be included as people living in chronic poverty), often leave the bottom-most untouched, and in terms of relative deprivation, worse off than before.

Seven years of experience within the public welfare system in California and a two year examination of the WIN Program² in three mid-western states, indicate that the major decision-making process is "creaming," and is inappropriate to the program goals, i.e., the movement of the hard-core disadvantaged,

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suffering from chronic, structural unemployment, into gainful jobs. "Creaming" procedures in the delivery of services, result in the poorest being the most likely to be excluded or left behind at each of the four steps through which they must successfully pass:

1. Presentation
 - a) Who is notified of the program?
 - b) What impression does the program make on its audience?
 - c) Is the program or service accessible to people who find it appealing and would like to participate in it?
2. Admission
 - a) What happens to people who apply for a service or program?
 - b) How do agencies treat them?
3. Completion
 - a) Who completes a program?
 - b) What is involved in their completing it?
 - c) Completion of a program is conditioned by the effort a person must expend to remain in a program, the willingness of the agency to keep him, the continuation of the program itself, and the amount of benefit he believes he is receiving or will receive from the program training.
4. Aftermath
 - a) Does anyone benefit from the services?
 - b) If so, who?
 - c) How lasting is their benefit?
 - d) Does the improvement in the individual's life help him obtain other benefits for himself or others?

Creaming results from a set of related factors: One of these is the relative ease of assimilating into a system those new persons that are similar to persons already in the system. Another is the heightened uniformity, efficiency, and productivity that results from such similarity. Third, as Miller³ suggests: "exclusion of persons less socialized to middle-class styles and current agency practices allows older institutions to avoid large-scale changes; those most amenable to existing programs are chosen or asked to participate."

"Creaming can also serve to maintain the status quo of the larger society. It co-opts the potential or actual leader of the poor and leaves untouched those poor who may be too miserable to pressure for change."⁴

Thus, by including only the upwardly mobile poor, a social welfare program is more likely to have "success." The self-fulfilling prophecy for some social service agencies of creating an impressive track record, getting additional funds as a result, and utilizing these monies to create a yet more impressive "success" story, is a reality.

Unfortunately for the hard-core unemployed, that portion of reality which is often overlooked, is what becomes of them after completing a manpower program. Too often, the ability to procure additional and larger private and federal grants becomes an end in itself, and the means to these monies, the enrollees, are manipulated in accordance with creaming strategies.⁵

Thus, many manpower programs are confronted with conflicting objectives. Their efforts to reduce risk, to establish a successful performance record based on placing on jobs the "easiest to place," and to help those most likely to succeed who don't need the benefit of assistance, all combine to work against the objective of providing meaningful, useful services for the hard-core unemployed.

In a recent study of decision-making in the WIN Program,⁶ it was discovered that in two years the Department of Labor created more jobs for the members of the research team (staff of four) than it did for the entire WIN operation in that Midwest City. Only one welfare recipient was placed on a job through the WIN Program in 24 months!

Creaming is a particularly successful program strategy when the economy provides fewer jobs than there are people actively seeking employment. The staffs of job-training, job-development, and job-placement programs are thus encouraged to be quite selective in whom they choose to prepare (educate, train, refer, orient) for future employment. Those who are not the most desirable, nor easily worked with, are processed, promised, and placed in such WIN Program components as administrative "hold," job-ready "hold," and between-program "hold."

The creaming process thus has a disturbing and debilitating effect on the enrollee especially on males. Many enrollees drop out of the program or merely go through the motions of participating. For the majority of people who enroll in the WIN program with the expectation of a job and don't get one, the experience reinforces the cycle of bitterness, disappointment, failure, frustration, and alienation.

In spite of federal policy and regulations to the contrary, staffs continue to make intuitive selection of the seemingly "best" enrollees (easiest to work with, good work history, education, high motivation). This particularistic approach is supported implicitly by administrators who are pressured into maintaining fiscally sound production records: records which aim at process and body counts, not significant outcomes for the enrollees. The most disadvantaged among the unemployed (the "untouchables") thus fall further into the hold "cul de sacs" of the bureaucratic maze, while those who would eventually get jobs on their own anyway, are credited as job placements for the WIN program. Those enrollees who pose the greatest challenge, and for whom the WIN program, and other Great Society programs were ostensibly designed, those virtually disenfranchised members of society characterized by poor work history, little education, and lack of job skills--the hard-core unemployed or under-employed, fall further toward the bottom of the barrel.

The practice of creaming represents a barrier to the maximum utilization of our human resources. Not only are the chronically underemployed and unemployed exploited and left to fall further out of the economic mainstream, they are manipulated to provide a hedge against higher wage, better working conditions for the regularly employed and ultimately a hedge for higher corporation profits.⁷

According to Richan,⁸ "for decades, relief programs had the function of maintaining a pool of low-skilled labor at subsistence levels, low enough to make low-paying jobs in private industry attractive. This surplus of cheap labor provided an important cushion for the ups and downs of the labor market." Similarly, Cloward and Piven⁹ point out that relief arrangements are ancillary to economic arrangements.

Their chief function is to regulate labor and they do that in two general ways. First, when mass unemployment leads to outbreaks of turmoil, relief programs are ordinarily initiated or expanded to absorb and control enough of the unemployed to restore order; then as turbulence subsides, the relief system contracts, expelling those who are needed to populate the labor market.

As Richan¹⁰ indicates, "work and training, or Title V or the Concentrated Employment Program (CEP) or WIN, is an euphemism for a system that holds some welfare recipients on a treadmill and siphons others into jobs which cannot attract workers from the regular labor force."

QUEUEING

If a social policy proposal is to have any salience and impact, it must be offered in the context of existing realities. Among these realities is legislation which embodies existing corporate interests--the big-business, private sector, free enterprise ideology which characterizes the economic system in this country. The Queueing Model does not and can not change the ideological underpinnings of our economic system.

A Queueing model of decision-making is proposed that could maximize the congruence between the client-need and server-resource mix in the WIN manpower program. This model is suggested as an alternative to the present particularistic matching and selection creaming procedures used by WIN.

Queueing theory is a mathematical approach to the problem of estimating the relationship between the amount of time which incoming items (consumers) will wait in a queue in terms of:

- a. The arrival time distribution (i.e., the distribution of the time between successive arrivals in the queue);
- b. The pattern of service times; and
- c. The number of service points.

A critical problem of many human service programs, especially those operating as WIN does on a large volume basis, is the slippage, or idle time that characterizes the consumer's movement through the system. In business sectors, this would be described as "down-time," a situation which has dire consequences for those concerned with profit and loss. Down-time, or waiting periods, also having invidious implication for job-training enrollees as well as for the WIN program workers and administrators.

According to operations research theory, the objectives of service are to balance the demand for service with the capacity of the server, to minimize the costs of waiting for services (consumers) and the idle time of the server facility (WIN program). This presents a queueing problem when the demand rate (requests for job training, and/or jobs) and the amount of service available (counselling, job development, GED, work experience, on-the-job training, job placement) are incongruent and when there are costs (loss of federal funding, cut-backs in program, political concern, tax-payer dissatisfaction, consumer dissatisfaction, unrest in the streets) associated with waiting time of consumers and the idle time of the service facility.

Thus, three critical issues are:

- a. The cost of waiting time or idleness to the consumer (this can be a psychological, social, physical, as well as economic cost);
- b. The costs of down-time or idle time to a public agency;
- c. The degree to which the amount of services available is subject to control.

Waiting, or idleness, is a cost to the consumer, not only in a monetary sense, but also as psychosocial cost. To be "cooled out," has definite negative consequence for the person such as unrealized heightened expectation, erosion of trust and credibility, frustration, anger and alienation. In addition, time spent in a manpower program often prevents many enrollees, especially street-corner men, from maintaining important community-based social contacts. It is also a cost to the consumer if he received a poor return on his investment (in this case his time and himself as human capital) e.g. a classroom opening, a training site, a job that never materializes.

"Down-time" is also a cost to the WIN program. If a public bureaucracy, such as WIN, strives for nothing else, it does concern itself about internal operations, and with accountability and efficiency. Slippage in the program erodes WIN production and impairs staff morale. Furthermore, and possibly more critical, idleness, or waiting time, prevents the program from satisfying its public charge: i.e., to facilitate the entry of recipients of AFDC into jobs that paid a living wage.

Although WIN cannot directly control the number of jobs available in the community, it does have control over the manpower-related supportive service vendors in the community by virtue of the federal subsidies it can pay them. WIN always has some control through its job development program; it can help shape the nature of jobs by the emphasis staff places on developing and consolidating job patterns in the community.

WIN, as with other public programs, is paying increasing attention to the pursuit of efficiency, accountability, and sound business management principles and techniques; its rationale being that efficiency of operation will enhance the program's effectiveness. A critical decision which any organization (even a non-profit, tax supported program such as WIN) must make is the selection of a single best course of action for the achievement of long range goals.

Cohen and Cyert¹¹ suggest that the only choice that must be made at a given point of time (such as when enrollees first come to the WIN program) and which cannot be postponed is the choice of the first move.

It follows from Cohen and Cyert that the proper concern of WIN operations is "determination and enforcement of the first-move component belonging to the optimal course of action over the firm's (or agency's) entire perspective history."¹²

Presently, WIN follows a FiFo (first in--first out) processing procedure. Enrollees are processed on a first-come, first-serve basis. Usually, enrollees are placed in the first WIN program component opening that becomes available.

Queueing, in contrast to creaming, stresses the long-term importance of the first decision. That is, if an enrollee were carefully assessed at the outset as to what his interests, background, motivation, and abilities were; the first program placement would be calculated on the basis of what this would mean to the enrollee in the long run. Present short run manipulations of enrollees would be replaced by a strategy that would be sensitive to both anticipated and unanticipated outcomes of the program placement.

An example of this might be placing a heavy equipment operator in a baking school, not because he is interested nor skilled in baking, but because he and the position are simultaneously available. Further planning, including use of projected manpower needs, might have revealed that what would have been most productive for our hypothetical heavy equipment operator, would have been sending him for on-the-job training for additional skills in the use of heavy equipment, while awaiting the opening of appropriate positions.

Moreover, the Queueing model facilitates reaching the "hard to place" simply by reducing the amount of time staff needs to work with the "cream"--who are generally not as much in need of services anyway.

In addition, systematic rather than intuitive processing will yield valuable information for the development of training programs, jobs and future planning.

Furthermore, rational placement procedures would assist in revealing those enrollees who require help in extricating themselves from the world of work since they are physically,

mentally or emotionally unfit, or help in providing some type of sheltered, protective, semi or non-competitive work environment. Also, there is a group of enrollees who with additional staff services, might be able to bridge the gap of heretofore unemployable or underemployable status, to that of being job ready.

Queueing will not replace Creaming until there are policy and program supports which reward outcomes that benefit the enrollee as well as provide incentives for program staff to work with the hard-to-reach. Because increased number counts often become translated into "success" by federal monitors of the WIN program, local administrators will not be motivated toward implementing the Queueing model until different evaluation criteria are instituted.

To encourage the implementation of a Queueing model of decision making, program "success" criteria needs to be revised to reflect the quality of placements, with a set of weighting factors being assigned to placements of varying difficulty. The difficulty factor would be considered in the production records of the human service workers--no longer would amount of activity be the sole criterion of evaluation; rather, the nature and quality of the activities and the difficulty factor regarding placements would be reflected in the monthly and quarterly audit reports.

For example, placement of enrollee A (he has had a good employment history--the "cream") onto a job might be assigned a difficulty factor of .3. Placement of a hard-to place enrollee B into a training class might be assigned a .5 weighting factor. Placement of enrollee B into a job with good probability of future potential might be assigned an .8 weighting. In brief, explicit recognition of the quality of the performance would facilitate staff spending additional time and effort with more difficult problem situation, thus providing an incentive for careful deliberation at the outset--the importance of the first move (Queueing).

CONCLUSION

A prime index of the worth of any manpower program is its ability to place people in jobs. The effectiveness of manpower programs, however, is limited by any larger social policy which restricts the opportunities for full employment and jobs which offer dignity and a decent wage. A queueing model cannot provide these opportunities, but it can provide an alternative to the present method of exacerbating the already-existing schism between the haves and the have-nots--even among the heterogeneous poor.

Queueing is a rational approach to decision-making in a human services program--whereby government, local WIN administration, staff, and most importantly, the consumers, can benefit from the increased probability of better services accruing from a publically funded program.

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