



A PARTNERSHIP OF:
Northern Illinois University
YMCA Alliance of
Metropolitan Chicago
Training, Inc. National
Association

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:
Aline Click
Project Manager
(815) 753-0673
aclick@niu.edu

or visit
www.criticalchoices.org

Critical Choices: Developing Skills for a Lifetime

"I had big dreams like everyone else... I had goals and didn't have the skills to get a good paying job to start working on them. My big dreams are no longer dreams – they have become reality."

Graduate of Training, Inc.

Project Overview

Critical Choices is a national project to create an online program that will help persons new to the workforce - especially those with low incomes - to identify the kind of career they would like and the essential skills or help they will need for workplace success.

Critical Choices is based on lessons learned from the "First Step," an effective classroom- based course developed by the YMCA Alliance of Metropolitan Chicago. This course focuses on self-knowledge, educational and occupational exploration, career planning, and life plan assessment. Research has shown such skills to be essential in bridging the gap to better paying jobs.

Launched in September 2001, the three-year project is a Learning Anytime, Anywhere Partnership effort funded through the U.S. Department of Education. It offers learners a personalized opportunity to work at their own pace as they complete various course chapters. But it is also designed for use with the help of a career counselor or facilitator, to ensure that learners receive the support they need to complete the program and succeed.

Critical Choices helps "bridge the digital divide" by increasing the computer skills of persons who need innovative methods to help them find and retain employment. It will also strengthen the critical thinking skills needed for self-assessment, goal setting, and problem solving.

The Critical Choices curriculum is being developed in 2003 and is currently being tested and evaluated in several pilot sites across the country. It will then be available for use by One-Stop career centers, community-based organizations, colleges, employers and other organizations involved in workforce development. Rockman et al is conducting the evaluation of the project, and the Critical Choices team will widely disseminate project learnings.

The project partnership brings together the skills and expertise of Northern Illinois University's team of online course designers and adult education and counseling specialists; the expertise and resources of the YMCA Alliance which delivers welfare-to-work programs locally in Chicago; and the expertise of Training, Inc., a consortium of training agencies that deliver welfare-to-work programs through partner affiliates located in Boston, MA, Indianapolis, IN, Newark, NJ, Pittsburgh, PA, and Albuquerque, NM.



The Partners

Northern Illinois University has entered into partnership with two organizations that bring important resources and capacities to the Critical Choices project. The YMCA Alliance of the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago and the national workforce development organization, Training Inc., National Association, collectively bring: 1) computer accessibility and convenience for the targeted learners; 2) non-governmental funding support for the program; 3) quality counseling services; 4) strong local and national reputation; and, 5) a history of successful outreach activities with the target population. Further, it is highly significant that the job retention rates achieved by graduates of both organizations far exceeds national averages (71% as compared with 40% nationally). NIU provides: 1) project management skills; 2) expertise in web-based course development and an online course delivery platform; 3) expertise in counselor training and adult education; and, 4) evaluation skills.

Both the YMCA Alliance and Training, Inc., bring proven track records in providing welfare-to-work training and access to the computer hardware needed for this project. Training Alliance's current course will provide the basic framework for curriculum development for Critical Choices. YMCA Alliance will disseminate the online course throughout metropolitan Chicago, and Training, Inc., through its partner associates, will disseminate the program nationally.

Northern Illinois University's (NIU)

Northern Illinois University is a comprehensive teaching and research institution with a student enrollment of over 23,000. Located 65 miles west of Chicago, in one of the most dynamic regions of the country, with its main campus in the City of DeKalb, NIU also operates regional sites in Rockford, Hoffman Estates, Oregon, and Naperville. The university is composed of seven degree-granting colleges and 41 academic departments that together offer 52 undergraduate degree majors and 52 graduate degree majors.

eLearning Services helps extend the University's resources by providing customized elearning solutions for groups throughout the region. NIU's eLearning Services helps organizations migrate traditional education and training to the Web. Among its clients or partners for the eLearning services are the American Bar Association, the Tube and Pipe Association, Intl', and the John G. Shedd Aquarium.

The Department of Counseling, Adult, and Health Education has a nationally and internationally known faculty with specialties in Adult Education and Career Development. The Adult Education and Counseling programs offer master's and doctoral degrees and a certificate in career development. Several faculty members within the department have research and teaching emphases on career development, vocational services, urban and rural community development, and instructional technology. Their collective expertise will be applied to this program. The department also houses The Office of Research and Evaluation (RE/ACE) and the Career Resource Center (CRC) with evaluation, research and career computer-based services that can be utilized.

In addition, NIU was recently awarded the highest designation, Doctoral/Research-Extensive, by the Carnegie Foundation, was invited into full membership in the prestigious Universities Research Association, and is the newest member of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.



YMCA Alliance of the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago

The YMCA Alliance is a unit of the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago, a 501(c3) charitable organization. Its Board of Directors is composed of 24 local individuals who represent the business community. Established in 1975, the agency has provided employment and training services to a disadvantaged population through a combination of public and private funding including CETA and WIA (Workforce Investment Act).

YMCA Alliance serves more than 2000 individuals annually with over 500 receiving extensive employment services. Most of these are economically disadvantaged individuals with extensive barriers to employment, and the majority are TANF recipients. Some lack a high school diploma or GED, others have disabilities, and most lack successful sustained employment histories. Services include a broad range of needs such as office skills training, Career Keys, hospitality training program, Administrative Clerk and Data-Entry classes, WorkFirst (a TANF job placement service), Wings-to-Work (a welfare-to-work program in affiliation with BankOne), Core and Intensive Services under WIA, Customized Training, Adult Basic Education, Computer Literacy and GED preparation classes.

The Training, Inc. National Association

The Training, Inc. National Association is a nationwide network of affiliated organizations that helps persons move toward self-sufficiency. Its affiliated partners that will participate in Critical Choices are located in Atlanta (YMCA of Metropolitan Atlanta), Boston (YMCA of Greater Boston), Indianapolis (Ivy Tech State College, Indianapolis, Indiana), Newark (Essex County College, Newark New Jersey), Pittsburgh (YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh) and Albuquerque, (New Mexico Commission on the Status of Women). Their success hinges on the unique integration of workplace simulation, learning organization and collaborative partnerships. Training, Inc. affiliate programs are sponsored by a variety of community-based organizations, community colleges, and public agencies. Although program lengths and designs vary, all programs include a work simulation environment with these components: technical job skills training, customer service/human relations, goal-setting/ problem-solving, business English, Math skills, employer internships, personal counseling and mentoring, job search skills, and job retention counseling.

Additional Resources

In addition to its partner organizations, NIU has identified the following organizations that wish to be part of focus group activity during the development stage.

- **Concord Commons Housing Development.** This is a public housing complex in Rockford, IL, which is conveniently close to NIU and can be used as a pilot site for course modules.
- **Rock Island Tri-County Consortium.** This is a One-Stop employment and training center (ETC) in a rural area. Piloting modules here will provide insight into how the program would work with One-Stops.



Project Goals, Outcomes and Deliverables

<p>Goals</p> <p>1. Create and implement a learner centered, web based distance learning modules critical thinking and workforce entry skills for individuals moving from welfare to work.</p>	<p>Outcomes</p> <p>1a. Program recipients at the YMCA Alliance in Chicago and recipients at national sites of Training, Inc will have access to and use a learner centered, web based distance learning curriculum for critical thinking and workforce entry skills.</p> <p>1.b. Program recipients will have increased skills and knowledge in the areas of critical thinking and other soft skills, workforce entry skills, and career development competencies.</p>	<p>Project Deliverables</p> <p>1. a. Online, Web-based workplace skills curriculum that will emphasize the development of critical thinking skills, soft skills, workplace entry skills, career development competencies, and technical skills</p>
<p>2. Obtain and customize basic computer skills and Web literacy course for learners to give them skills needed to complete the Critical Choices chapters and to assess Web-based materials for future learning anytime, anywhere.</p>	<p>2.a. Program recipients at the YMCA Alliance in Chicago and recipients at National sites of Training, Inc will have access to and use a basic computer skills and Web literacy course.</p> <p>2.b. Program recipients will feel more comfortable with computer use and have increased their basic computer skills and Web literacy.</p>	<p>2.a. Basic computer skills and Web literacy course for learners that will give them skills needed to complete the Critical Choices Modules and assess Web based materials for future learning anytime, anywhere.</p>
<p>3. Develop a computerized curriculum that works within the supportive services of a self-sufficiency program and anytime, anywhere learning.</p>	<p>3.a. Delivery system partnership will be created so that currently offered support services such as case management, and classroom training will be integrated with an online course and basic computer skills training, to create a new comprehensive, blended experience.</p> <p>3.b. Counseling and other support services will be integrated into the online course, so that participants' experience a comprehensive, blended delivery of services and training.</p>	<p>3.a. Training process and Job Aids (manuals) that will teach facilitators of classroom courses and case managers to integrate their supportive relationships with online course experience.</p> <p>3.b. Comprehensive, blended model for offering online course experience, including the integration of a help-desk support person and post-placement follow-up.</p>
<p>4. Discover how learners access, use and learn from the curriculum when using it outside of the group setting.</p>	<p>4.a. Program recipients will seek out and use computers that are available to them.</p>	<p>4.a. Report detailing barriers and facilitators to online course use for welfare-to-work recipients.</p>
<p>5. Foster professionally satisfying relationships focusing on accountability and information exchange about project activities for all partners, with special emphasis on project staff.</p>	<p>5.a. Partners will be able to satisfactorily work together and coordinate service delivery between various partners and program components.</p> <p>5.b. Partners will have a thorough understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each type of delivery system through the collection of efficacy data.</p>	<p>5.a. Coordinated delivery systems between all partners so that recipients and information flow smoothly between various partners and program components.</p> <p>5.b. Multiple assessment formats, items, instruments, and a model for evaluating online course for welfare to work recipients.</p>
<p>6. Market and roll out Critical Choices to programs seeking to move welfare recipients from welfare to work.</p>	<p>6.a. Organizational Plan to integrate online course into service delivery model at all Training, Inc. sites.</p> <p>6.b. Implementation Plan to roll out Critical Choices program to Employment Training sites and other interested agencies.</p>	<p>6.a. Formative, summative, and external evaluation and development reports.</p> <p>6.b. Marketing Plan and letters of agreements.</p>