



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

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## Press Release

### **Critical Choices: A New Approach to Workforce Development**

Northern Illinois University is partnering with the YMCA Alliance of Metropolitan Chicago and the Indianapolis-based Training Inc. National Association in a project that aims to help welfare recipients cross the digital divide and sustain employment. The U.S. Department of Education this fall awarded NIU a \$1.56 million grant to fund the new project, "Critical Choices: Distance Learning for At-Risk Workforce." It is the largest award this year through the department's Learning Anytime Anywhere Partnerships, a grant program for nationally significant distance education projects.

The centerpiece of Critical Choices will be an online course accessed by program participants at Chicago-area YMCA Lifelong Learning Centers. On a regular basis, participants also will interact face-to-face with program counselors and mentors. The program itself will focus on workforce development with an emphasis on the acquisition of soft skills, including decision-making, career-planning and interpersonal skills.

Janet Lessner, Director of NIU's eLearning Services, expressed gratitude to U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) and Hazel Loucks, Illinois Deputy Governor for Education and Workforce Development, who both supported the project (see accompanying comments). Lessner will serve as the Critical Choices project director and Francesca Giordano, assistant chair of NIU's Department of Counseling, Adult and Health Education, is project co-director.

NIU, the YMCA Alliance and Training Inc., a national consortium of training agencies, will develop and refine the Critical Choices program over the next year. The partners will launch the pilot program in late 2002 for welfare recipients and other low-income populations. During the program's third year, Training Inc. will implement Critical Choices nationally. At that point, project directors estimate it could serve as many as 4,000 clients.

Importantly, the Critical Choices partners aren't starting their program from square one. Rather, they are building upon successful welfare-to-work initiatives already established by the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago and Training Inc. Programs run by the two organizations boast job-retention rates that far exceed the national average (71 percent as compared to 40 percent nationally). While the Y's efforts are concentrated in Chicago, the Training Inc. consortium has agencies that deliver welfare-to-work programs through partner affiliates in Boston, Indianapolis, Newark, Pittsburgh and Albuquerque.

"We are proud to partner with Northern Illinois University and Training Inc. to provide our communities with tools to build the skills that are essential in today's economy," said Steve Cole, President and Chief Executive Officer of the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago. "Employment and solid educational skills are a key need in all communities, but are limited in many of the lower-income Chicago neighborhoods that are anchored by YMCAs," Colesaid. "Residents in these areas recognize the importance of computer skills in the competitive job market."



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**The program will have three phases:**

1. Skills assessment and basic computer and Internet training.
2. A 15-module online course teaching critical-thinking skills, computer literacy and interpersonal skills necessary for success in the workplace.
3. An "online community center," where participants will find job postings and use links, threaded discussions and chat rooms to share successful workplace strategies and access additional resources and support.

Cole said the YMCA's Lifelong Learning Centers will provide easy computer access to clients of Critical Choices. "YMCA Lifelong Learning Centers are more than key-boarding and computer games; they give residents an opportunity to learn and use technology that is key to employment and educational opportunities," Cole said.

NIU President John Peters said the university is excited about the opportunity to work with its new partners and to bring its expertise in online learning and adult education to areas of critical need. "We believe Critical Choices will provide a comprehensive and successful approach to welfare-to-work initiatives," Peters said.

"Our mission as a public university is to serve the educational needs of all adults in northern Illinois" he added. "In this case, NIU brings expertise in curriculum development, adult education, counseling and online-course development. It's a perfect fit with our partners, the YMCA Alliance and Training Inc., who both have proven records of success in working with low-income populations."

The federal grant to NIU comes from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education (FIPSE) in the U.S. Department of Education, through its Learning Anytime Anywhere Partnerships Program. The grant will cover 44 percent of the total \$3.5 million project. The remaining 56 percent of funding will come from university and other non-federal sources. The project officially began Sept. 1 and will extend through Aug. 31, 2004.

For more information on Critical Choices, see <http://www.criticalchoices.org>.

## **What supporters of Critical Choices say**



*"By blending classroom teaching and Internet technology, Critical Choices will teach the skills needed to excel in today's job*

*market. This program will also help bridge the digital divide by introducing former welfare recipients to online education."*

**-U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin (D-III.)**



*"I am extremely excited about the potential positive impact that the Northern Illinois University,*

*YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago and Training Inc. LAAP grant will have. Governor Ryan and I are strong proponents of comprehensive approaches that integrate technology, critical 'soft skills' education, and person- to-person case management in serving low-income, at-risk individuals. This grant award to these partners achieves this approach, and we are proud to support its implementation."*

**-Hazel Loucks,  
Deputy Governor for Education  
and Workforce Development**