



**SkillWorks**<sup>SM</sup>  
PARTNERS FOR A PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE

## **Achieving System Change: The Experience of Phase I**

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**JUNE 2009**

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
Bank of America Charitable Gift Fund and the Frank W.  
and Carl S. Adams Memorial Fund, Bank of America,  
N.A., Trustee  
Boston 2004  
The Boston Foundation  
City of Boston's Neighborhood Jobs Trust  
The Clowes Fund  
Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
The Hyams Foundation

The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust  
The John Merck Fund  
The Paul and Phyllis Fireman Foundation  
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
The Rockefeller Foundation  
State Street Foundation  
The William Randolph Hearst Foundation  
United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

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# Introduction

SkillWorks is an ambitious Initiative that brought together a coalition of public funders and local and national foundations to invest over a five-year period in a set of activities that could lead to longer-term, large-scale, and sustainable improvements in the workforce development system in Boston. Its broad goals were to help low-income individuals attain family wage jobs, improve the quality of the workforce for businesses, increase the resources available for workforce development, enhance the capacity of workforce development providers to meet the needs of low-income individuals and employers, and, finally, to promote changes in public policy that would support the advancement of low-income individuals into family sustaining jobs. To accomplish these goals, the Initiative focused on three overlapping strategies: strengthening service provider capacity, investing in sector-based workforce partnerships, and advocating for public policies that lead to system improvements.

Over the past five years, SkillWorks has invested in the following workforce partnerships:

1. The Boston Health Care and Research Training Institute (HCRTI), a partnership among two CDCs, a CBO, a number of training providers, and multiple healthcare institutions in the Longwood Medical Area.
2. The Hotel Career Center (HCC), a partnership led by the International Institute of Boston with participation by the Hilton Hotels.
3. Partners in Career and Workforce Development (PCWD), a partnership led by Partners HealthCare, a network of hospitals and other healthcare organizations along with service providers including Project Hope, Jewish Vocational Services, and WorkSource.
4. Building Services Industry Career Path Project, a partnership led by Voice and Future Fund, a nonprofit union-led educational provider, in partnership with building owners and maintenance contractors.
5. Partnership for Automotive Career Education, a partnership led by the Asian American Civic Association in partnership with two CBOs, Madison Park Technical School, Ben Franklin Technical College, and multiple automotive-related employers.
6. Community Health Worker Initiative, led by Action for Boston Community Development, a broad-based partnership involving 11 employers; Bunker Hill and Mass Bay Community Colleges; Mass. Department of Public Health; Mass. Community Health Worker Association; and the Mass. League of Community Health Centers. This initiative is still in progress so its system change-related outcomes are not included in this analysis.

In addition to the partnerships, SkillWorks also made a five-year grant to the Workforce Solutions Group (WSG), a partnership of organizations responsible for designing and implementing the public policy advocacy component of the Initiative.

A detailed evaluation of each of these investments has been completed as part of the Phase I evaluation of SkillWorks. However, SkillWorks was very clear from its inception that success needed to include some level of scale and sustainability in its outcomes through the interaction of all of its activities. Achieving scale and sustainability required broader “system change.” Looking at how all of the components of SkillWorks came together to achieve this system change is the focus of this report.

## Systems Change Framework

The SkillWorks Initiative evolved from a planning process led by the Boston Foundation, which was influenced by the strong “system change” orientation of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Job Initiative. In addition to learning from the Jobs Initiative, the planning for SkillWorks also took into consideration the experience from the previous sector partnership projects that were taking place in Massachusetts. Most notably, SkillWorks considered the experiences of the Commonwealth Corporation’s BEST Initiative and the Fleet Foundation (Bank of America) sector partnership efforts. These projects had already made some initial investments in sector-based career pathways projects and had also set out broader, more comprehensive system change goals.

The initial planning effort eventually resulted in a framework in which the system change outcomes were determined to be the major focus of the Initiative. As noted in *Reinventing Workforce Development: Lessons from Boston’s Community Approach* by Jobs for the Future:

At its core, SkillWorks is about fundamentally changing how workforce development is done in Boston so that it reflects a new set of fundamental principles, provides services reflecting those principles to large numbers of Boston residents and employers, and institutionalizes those principles in the larger workforce system so that they continue long after the funders stop providing grants.

The system change framework was conceptualized as a stool with three legs: 1) sector workforce partnerships; 2) capacity building; and 3) public policy. One of the key assumptions about the SkillWorks’ “system change” agenda was a strong belief that each component of the model—each of the three legs—would have to interact with the others to achieve system changes. As noted in the report *Working Toward Reinvention: SkillWorks at Three* by Jobs for the Future, “According to the SkillWorks theory of change, each component interacts with and informs the activities of the others, leading to sustainable, systemic progress.”

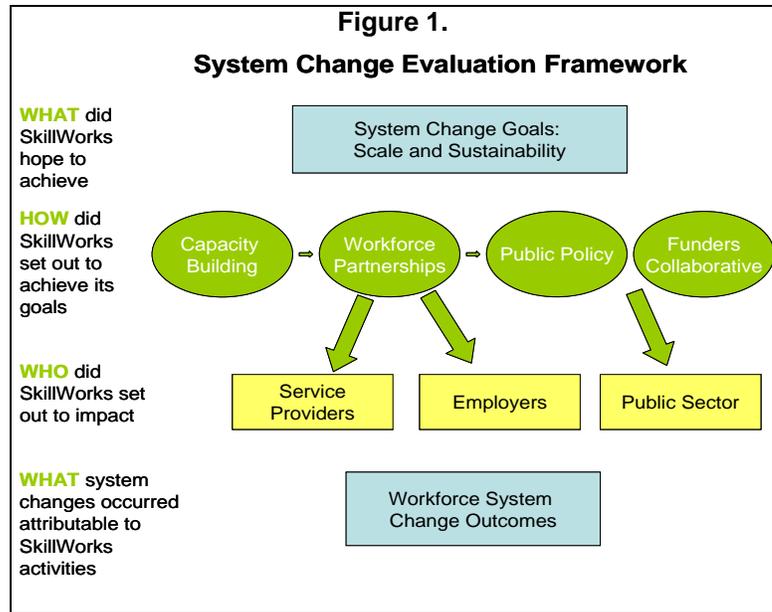
In addition, implicit in the SkillWorks framework, the Funders Group itself was thought to be another source of activity that could lead to system changes. The assumption was that the innovative collaboration of multiple philanthropic funders in partnership with both city and state public funders could lead to additional changes in the workforce development system in Boston. Thus, there were really four “activity areas” that together were assumed to lead to overall changes in the ways the workforce development system in Boston served low-income adults and employers. (See Figure 1.) These activities areas were:

**Workforce Partnerships.** The activities of the partnerships were to demonstrate best practices that were replicable, to identify barriers that could be addressed by public policy, and to develop sustainable activities through expansion to other employers.

**Public Policy/Advocacy.** The public policy activities were designed to address statewide policies that would improve the ability of the workforce development system to help low-income individuals advance to family supporting jobs.

**Capacity Building.**<sup>1</sup> The capacity building activities focused on strengthening the SkillWorks partnerships through technical assistance and creating a learning community.

**The Funders Collaborative.** The Funders Group, which initially included eight Boston area and national foundations as well as the Boston Mayor’s Office of Jobs and Community Services and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development, would oversee the investments, ensure their effectiveness, and explore strategic workforce development priorities to achieve their mission.



Another key element of the SkillWorks Theory of Change was the assumption that the combination of the four sets of activities would lead to outcomes that were *comprehensive* in terms of system outcomes, would achieve *scale*, with a significant number of low-income individuals and employers benefiting, and would be *sustainable* over time. Unless the outcomes of the Initiative went beyond the direct participants involved in the partnerships and beyond the timeframe of the funders’ five-year grant period, the overall goals of the Initiative would not be met.

Achieving *sustainability* and *scale* was dependent on longer-term cultural changes in all of the stakeholders involved in the workforce system. There were three primary targets for these culture changes:

1. *Workforce development providers:* Service providers would be impacted through two means. First, service providers participating in workforce partnerships funded through SkillWorks would improve their practices. Second, this learning would be diffused more generally amongst service providers in Boston through learning activities and capacity building activities.
2. *Employers:* By participating in the workforce partnerships, employers would understand the benefits of career pathway activities and make changes in their human resource practices such as greater attention to career development and more investments in training. Scale would be achieved by expanding the number of employers involved in the partnerships and a diffusion of learning to other employers, particularly in the funded industry sectors.
3. *Public sector:* Through the efforts of the Funders Group, WSG (the public policy grantee), and the learning from the partnerships, the public sector would restructure how

<sup>1</sup> The approach to capacity building evolved over the course of Phase I of SkillWorks. Initially, capacity building activities focused on strengthening the organizational and programmatic capacity of mid-size community-based organizations in Boston.

it funds and delivers workforce development and adopt the core principles guiding SkillWorks.

## Methodology

This memo looks at the initial framework that guided the SkillWorks system change agenda and examines how successful the SkillWorks Initiative has been in achieving the types of system changes that it had intended. The following research questions are addressed:

- How has the workforce development system changed over the five years of Phase I of SkillWorks?
- What has SkillWorks done to try to achieve system changes in the public policy arena, amongst service providers, and in the employer community?
- What system changes have occurred that are attributable to SkillWorks activities?
- What can we learn that has relevance to Phase II of SkillWorks and to other comparable initiatives?

The methodology for evaluating system change starts with the original research plan for the evaluation of the SkillWorks Initiative, drafted by Abt Associates and Mt. Auburn Associates. This memo laid out how system change would be evaluated over the course of the Initiative. (See Attachment A: System Change Research Plan.) In addition, the initial *Baseline Report of the SkillWorks Initiative*, completed in April 2005, provided an extensive analysis of the policy context within which SkillWorks was operating at the start of the Initiative. This policy baseline was used in the assessment of how the system has changed.

To better understand how the system has changed during this timeframe and to assess the role of SkillWorks in any of these changes, the following methods were used:

- Interviews were conducted with 15 key stakeholders including SkillWorks funders, individuals involved in the SkillWorks Initiative who continue to work in the workforce field in the state, and individuals who have been involved in state workforce development over the past five years.
- The partners in the SkillWorks partnerships were interviewed in depth about system change outcomes. In addition, employer partners, lead partners, and non-lead service provider partners were surveyed about their perceptions of changes in the system and in the culture of their own organizations.
- An online survey was distributed to 100 workforce development practitioners in Boston. Thirty individuals responded to the survey. The survey included questions about perceptions of how the system has changed in the last five years, the role of SkillWorks, as well as changes in the practices and culture of the respondent's organization.

It is important to note that this evaluation is largely based upon *perceptions*. While there are some clear quantitative indicators, such as the amount of new funding in the system, most of the evaluation is based on how those working on a day-to-day basis within the system perceive how the workforce development system has changed and the role that SkillWorks has played in any of these changes.

## The Context—The Evolving State Workforce System

The analysis of the workforce system in Massachusetts in the *Baseline Report* concluded that the state and local workforce development systems were already experimenting with many improved practices that conformed to SkillWorks principles. Public entities were already using the “dual customer” language; many service providers had begun to realize the benefits of one-on-one career coaching and case management; workforce partnerships had already been established; the FESS standard had been increasingly used; and MassINC’s report, *New Skills for a New Economy*, had focused considerable attention on the state’s skill gap. On the other hand, according to the *Baseline Report*, there was much more limited attention to addressing the following three major system issues: 1) the multiple program silos operating within the public workforce development funding environment; 2) the continuity of the system in terms of meeting the long-term career advancement needs of low-skilled individuals; and 3) the challenges of enhancing the capacity of the state’s community colleges.

The survey provides evidence that there is widespread agreement that the workforce system in Massachusetts has changed significantly over the last four years, and has changed across a broad range of issue areas. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1: Perceptions of changes in the workforce development system over the past 5 years.**

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N
There is greater sensitivity to the needs of employers	86%	14%	0%	25
Level of employer interest in workforce development has increased	86%	10%	5%	25
Workforce development is perceived as a more critical issue for the Commonwealth	83%	17%	0%	25
Foundations are more involved in workforce development	81%	10%	10%	25
Level of collaboration amongst workforce development organizations has increased	77%	14%	9%	25
There is a greater understanding amongst workforce development organizations of the workforce needs of low-income, low-skilled individuals	76%	14%	10%	25
Family Economic Self-Sufficiency is seen as a goal of workforce development activities	70%	22%	9%	25
There is greater alignment amongst the agencies in the state involved in workforce development	67%	14%	19%	25
ABE and ESOL programs are more effective at achieving skills improvements amongst participants	62%	14%	24%	25
The system has a more "dual customer" approach to workforce development	59%	29%	12%	25
There are more resources available for workforce development in the Commonwealth	58%	17%	25%	25
Community colleges are more effective resources in the workforce development system	32%	27%	41%	25
There is increased flexibility in the funding available through the public workforce development system	29%	24%	48%	25

Source: Online Survey of 30 Workforce Development Practitioners in Boston.

Note: Responses of those that replied

This section briefly reviews the perceptions of those surveyed and interviewed about how the workforce system has evolved over the past five years. Its purpose is to provide the broader context in which SkillWorks was operating.

***New leadership.*** Perhaps the greatest change in the public policy environment over the past five years has been the election of a new governor, which brought with it new leadership in many of the state agencies involved in education and workforce development. This newly-elected leadership came with a new commitment to the dual customer approach. The revitalization of the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board (MWIB) into a strong, statewide policy and oversight group led to increased engagement amongst a wide variety of workforce development practitioners and education and training stakeholders in the development of a more integrated and strategic approach to addressing workforce development challenges in the state. For example, a subcommittee of the MWIB is charged with developing one performance report for all workforce providers. A second

subcommittee has begun to address the longstanding issues related to the state's ABE/ESOL system and has led to the creation of a state level policymaking group that is focusing on how to more closely link community-based and workplace ABE/ESOL services with occupational skills, career pathways, and postsecondary transitions.

***Institutionalizing the sector approach.*** When asked what has been the greatest change in the workforce development system in Massachusetts over the past five years, a number of those interviewed, as well as respondents to the survey, noted that the more widespread adoption of sector-based workforce partnerships was the most notable change. Survey and interview respondents concurred that a sector-based approach to workforce development, with a focus on career pathways, has become more institutionalized as well as a more integral part of the workforce strategies of both policymakers and practitioners.

***Increased funding for workforce development and awareness amongst policymakers of its importance.*** Through the 2004 Economic Stimulus Bill and the 2006 Workforce Solutions Act, the state provided increased investment for a variety of workforce development activities. Beyond this funding, respondents generally agree that there is greater awareness of the importance of addressing the state's skills gap. The survey of practitioners found that 83 percent agreed that workforce development is now perceived as a more important issue. (See Chart 1.)

***Quality improvements at the state's WIBs.*** One of the major initiatives of the new Administration has been to strengthen the state's WIBs through sponsoring a High Performing Board Initiative. This effort aims at increasing the capacity of the state's WIBs and has a specific focus on promoting new regional business partnerships, with a particular interest in sector projects that align business needs with labor market supply.

***Greater sensitivity to the needs of employers and increased partnering with employers.*** The interviews and surveys also found that beyond accepting the dual customer approach, state and local agencies, as well as the workforce service providers, have increasingly incorporated this principle into the implementation of their workforce development programs. Every respondent to the survey reported that his or her organization increased its understanding of employer needs. Providers also noted that they had increased capacity to work directly with employers on workforce development.

***Increased understanding of the workforce challenges of low-income residents.*** In the system overall there is a greater appreciation of the needs of low-income, low skilled residents and the timeframe and complexity of helping these residents succeed along a career pathway. For example, the survey of workforce practitioners found that three-quarters believe that service providers now have a better understanding of the workforce needs of low-income, low-skilled individuals.

***Some progress in state agency alignment.*** Addressing the multiple workforce development-related funding silos at the state level is probably the most often mentioned and discussed public policy-related system change challenge. Interviews with state and local stakeholders found widespread agreement that while the silos still exist, progress has been made in increasing the alignment of state agencies involved in workforce development. It has become more standard practice to convene multiple agencies involved in education and training when any workforce development policy issue is addressed.

***Much work, but little progress on community colleges.*** One of the major challenges noted at the end of the initial *Baseline Report* was that there was insufficient attention to the role of community

colleges in the system. There has been considerable work over the past five years that focused attention on the effectiveness of the state's community colleges including work by the Boston Foundation, MassINC, and the city of Boston. Partially in response to this work, in 2007, the Board of Higher Education was selected as the lead state policy organization for a Massachusetts Achieving the Dream initiative. Despite this work, there is widespread agreement that progress in addressing some of the challenges related to community colleges in Massachusetts has been slow. Both interviewees and survey respondents noted that this was the weakest area in terms of system change. Of the practitioners surveyed, only one-third thought progress had been made. (See Chart 1.) Interviews confirmed this overall perception. While many noted improvements at particular community colleges, overall there was a sense that considerable progress still needed to be made before the state's community colleges were fully effective partners in the workforce development system.

***Little progress in creating a continuum of services and multiple points of access.*** The concept of reforming the public workforce system so that there is a greater continuum of services and “multiple point of access” was one of the challenges noted in the *Baseline Report*. Unfortunately, many of those interviewed still note that the need for multiple points of entry into the system and continuity once one has entered the system remains one of the most significant challenges in the state's workforce development system. Disconnects between the public Career Centers and the nonprofit service providers still persist. Moreover, there is no continuity in services or improved referral system amongst the many organizations in the city that provide ESOL, ABE, pre-employment training, and occupational training targeted to low-skilled individuals.

***Increased number of employers participating in sector partnerships.*** While there is little evidence of widespread increased engagement of employers in workforce development policy in the state, there are a growing number of employers who are participating in sector partnerships through the investments that have been made in the state through SkillWorks, as well as the Commonwealth Corporation's sector workforce partnerships funded through the WCTF.

While many of the system changes that have taken place reflect the perspective of the SkillWorks Initiative, the key evaluation question is what role, if any, SkillWorks has had in these changes. The following sections explore in more detail the system change outcomes associated with the activities of SkillWorks.

## Public Policy-Related System Changes

The *Baseline Report* presented seven examples of public policy-related changes in the workforce system that SkillWorks set out as important in its initial thinking. (See sidebar.) This section reviews progress in these areas and the role that SkillWorks has played in achieving these changes.

### SkillWorks' Public Policy-Related Activities

The public policy activities of SkillWorks involved the five-year grant to the Workforce Solutions Group, a partnership the Crittenton Women's Union, the Massachusetts Communities Action Network, the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board Association; the state AFL-CIO, and the activities of the SkillWorks Funders Group and SkillWorks director.

Over the five years of funding, WSG was actively involved in:

- building a statewide constituency with an interest in improving the workforce development system;
- engaging in lobbying and advocacy for increased state funding for workforce development;
- authoring and lobbying for legislation that advances the goals and principles of SkillWorks; and
- providing assistance and oversight related to the implementation of public policies that were established as a result of its lobbying and legislative activities.

In addition to the work of the WSG, the SkillWorks funders and SkillWorks director also were involved in public policy issues. The SkillWorks director helped plan policy forums of relevance to the workforce field and participated as a member on a number of task forces and subcommittees related to workforce development policy. The Funders Group was also involved in overseeing the direction of WSG and engaging in some advocacy work through its organizations and networks.

The initial model also included a role for the workforce partnerships in the public policy change agenda. Public policy change priorities were to emerge from effective practice. The idea was that as the partnerships ran into barriers in the system that were affecting their outcomes, they would work with their colleagues to pursue policy responses to address these barriers.

## The Role of SkillWorks in Achieving Public Policy-Related Changes

Results from the survey and interviews of Phase I partners, Phase I funders, and other workforce development practitioners and stakeholders found:

- SkillWorks, through the effective lobbying efforts of the WSG and the participation of the Funders Group, was largely responsible for the increase in funding for workforce development over the past five years. Through the Stimulus Bill of 2004 and the Workforce Solutions Act of 2006, there were \$24 million in additional resources allocated to workforce development in the state. In addition, through the implementation of the FSET program, there has been increased federal funding coming into the state outside of the more traditional federal workforce development funding silos.
- There is general consensus that the work of WSG was key to increasing the visibility of the workforce development issue for state policymakers. While some of the work and thinking about the skills gap preceded SkillWorks, as noted by one stakeholder, “The messaging has gotten clearer due to WSG.” The building of a stronger statewide constituency and growing awareness of the importance of workforce development could lead to more sustainable increases in state funding for workforce development in the future as well as policy changes that conform to the SkillWorks goals.
- The role of WSG in writing and lobbying for the Workforce Solutions Act (WSA) was a notable achievement that led to many important public policy changes. In addition to increasing funding for many workforce development programs, the Act established the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund, created the Educational Rewards Program that allowed for college grants for part-time students, created the Accountability Task Force to address governance and performance issues in the state’s workforce system, and created the legislative language needed to increase the flow of federal FSET funds into the state.
- The continuing effort of the WSG and the SkillWorks funders to further institutionalize sector workforce partnerships in the state through the WCTF was seen by the vast majority of those interviewed as one of the most important “system change” outcomes associated with Phase I of SkillWorks. While the WSA established the WCTF, the challenge became how to continue its funding after the initial investment of \$11 million by the state. Over the past few years, SkillWorks, primarily through its public policy grantee WSG, has been working to establish a line item budget for the WCTF and to have it become the recipient of all sector specific workforce development investments by the Commonwealth.

### **SkillWorks Baseline Report: Anticipated policy-related system changes**

- increased and sustainable public investment in workforce development;
- the incorporation of a “dual customer” approach—working to meet the needs of both jobseekers/workers and employers;
- the use of the family economic self-sufficiency standard (FESS) as a key performance metric throughout the system;
- multiple points of access—simplified access to workforce development services for low-income individuals, regardless of where they are on a career ladder;
- institutionalizing the support of industry- and occupation-based partnerships within the system;
- reducing the silo-oriented funding within the system and increasing the use of blended funding; and
- making public institutions such as community colleges more effective at meeting the workforce development needs of working adults and local employers.

Complicating the issue of “attribution” of workforce system changes to SkillWorks activities has been the change in administrations in the Commonwealth over the course of Phase I of the Initiative. Deval Patrick’s election as governor was followed by new leadership in key state workforce-related positions, as well as an interest in revitalizing the state’s Workforce Investment Board, which had been largely dormant for the past decade. Interviews with those involved in workforce development indicate that a good deal of the progress made on the workforce development system has been primarily due to this change in leadership. In particular:

- Individuals from the WSG as well as the SkillWorks director have participated in some of the subcommittees of the revitalized Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board. Through their participation, they may have played some role in terms of increasing the accountability of the system (SkillWorks raised this issue through the Accountability Task Force convened as a result of the WSA) and addressing some of the alignment and service delivery issues. However, most report that many system changes are more attributable to the revitalization of MWIB and the strong leadership and support of the new Administration.
- While progress has been made in easing the longstanding tensions between the ABE community and the workforce development community and in increasing the commitment for workplace-based ABE and ESOL, most of those interviewed and surveyed do not believe that this was largely attributable to the work of SkillWorks.

## Changes in Workforce Service Provider System Capacity

At its outset, SkillWorks believed that to achieve its goals and to reach scale, the workforce service providers would have to be transformed, with an increased capacity to serve the dual customers. This section summarizes the perceptions in the field about the type of changes that have been achieved in the capacity of the service providers to more effectively serve a dual customer base and the role of SkillWorks in achieving these changes. The anticipated system changes outlined in the *Baseline Report* (see sidebar) form the foundation of this analysis.

## SkillWorks Activities Affecting Workforce Development Service Providers

As noted in the initial framework, the workforce partnerships were intended to be the foundation of many of the system changes achieved through SkillWorks. The partnerships were supposed to demonstrate successful practices that could be more broadly replicated in the field, leading to more scalable culture changes in the service provider community.

The capacity building activities were also thought to be the main means by which system changes would occur in the workforce service provider community. During Phase I of the SkillWorks Initiative, two distinct models of

### **SkillWorks Baseline Report: Service providers’ anticipated system changes**

- providing longer-term engagement with low-wage workers;
- screening for and simplifying access to support services and income supplements;
- better linking low-income residents to specific jobs with specific employers and training people with marketable credentials;
- having enhanced flexibility and responsiveness in their efforts to increase the ease of working adults’ access to training and services;
- providing a continuum of services—literacy, basic skill development, and increasing occupational skill development—that is linked to a career ladder; and
- using data to promote continuous improvement.

capacity building were pursued sequentially. The capacity building activities delivered under the first model were conducted under the aegis of the Rockefeller Foundation’s “Initiative to Strengthen Organizational Effectiveness in Workforce Development.” The early capacity building activities supported five nonprofit, workforce development service providers in Boston to improve their operational competencies and performance. Four of five Boston organizations participating in the Rockefeller Initiative became partners in SkillWorks partnerships. In addition, during this early stage of SkillWorks, the Boston Private Industry Council provided direct technical assistance to the partnerships. At the conclusion of the Rockefeller Initiative, the SkillWorks Funders Group decided to integrate capacity building more fully into the overall SkillWorks effort. As a result, starting in 2006, the goal of capacity building shifted from one of increasing the capacity of workforce development service providers in Boston generally to specifically increasing the capacity of the SkillWorks partnerships so that they could more effectively achieve the goals spelled out in their applications and work plans.

Thus, in terms of the formal capacity building program of SkillWorks, most of the “system” change outcomes would be reflected directly in the achievements of the partnerships.

However, in addition to the “formal” capacity building program of SkillWorks, the Funders Group has sponsored some activities that have tried to spread the learning to the broader workforce development community. For example, SkillWorks has a website that provides profiles and learnings related to the partnerships and has sponsored forums on workforce development “system” issues that have brought national experts to Boston. These forums have been open to the entire workforce development field and have sought to raise awareness and learning around some of the workforce development system issues of concern to the Initiative.

The survey of workforce practitioners found that a relatively large number had participated in SkillWorks-related activities beyond the formal capacity building. (See Table 2.) Many respondents also reported that their participation had an impact on their organization. In particular, over three-quarters noted that their participation in SkillWorks convenings and WSG meetings provided useful information that had an impact on their organization.

The Funders Group is also a potential source of “system change” in the Boston workforce development provider community. There has been significant learning amongst the individual funders participating in the Initiative. To the extent this learning is translated and applied to the other grantmaking activities of the funders, there is the potential to have a broader system impact of the city’s workforce service providers.

**Table 2: Participation in SkillWorks-related activities**

	Yes	No	N
SkillWorks Web page	52%	48%	29
Convenings or meetings sponsored by SkillWorks	75%	25%	28
Convenings or meetings sponsored by the Workforce Solutions Group	64%	36%	28
Reports written about the SkillWorks Initiative	57%	43%	30
Other SkillWorks-related activities	39%	61%	26

Source: Online Survey of 30 Workforce Development Practitioners in Boston.

Finally, the RFP process for SkillWorks, as well as the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund, also promoted some changes amongst the workforce service provider community. Almost every major workforce development organization in Boston has applied for or been part of a team that has applied for SkillWorks funding. Through this process, they developed new collaborative relationships and came to understand some of the principles associated with the SkillWorks Initiative.

## The Role of SkillWorks in Achieving Changes amongst Workforce Service Providers

Interviews with partner organizations involved in SkillWorks provide clear evidence that the Initiative has had an impact on changing the culture of many of the providers involved in the partnerships. The responses to the survey of Phase I partners (see Table 3) indicate that both lead partners and other service providers believe that their participation in SkillWorks has had the greatest impact on their organizations' capacity to work with employers and their use of and effectiveness of career coaching.

**Table 3: Impact of participation in SkillWorks on organization capacity: Lead and non-lead partners.**

	No Impact 1	→			Significant Positive Impact 5	Avg. of Responses	N
		2	3	4			
Capacity to work with employers	13%	7%	7%	33%	40%	4.00	16
Increased use of and effectiveness of career coaching	14%	7%	14%	29%	36%	4.43	16
Level of collaboration with other workforce development organizations	20%	0%	27%	27%	27%	3.86	16
Use of data for continuous improvement	20%	7%	20%	27%	27%	3.71	16
Understanding of workforce development needs of low-income, low-skilled individuals	20%	13%	13%	27%	27%	4.00	16
Understanding of public policy issues of most importance to workforce development practitioners in Massachusetts	13%	0%	38%	25%	25%	3.14	16
Level of partnership activity with Massachusetts employers	20%	0%	0%	60%	20%	3.86	16
Development of new and effective curriculum for skill enhancement	13%	27%	27%	13%	20%	3.14	16
Use of pre- and post-training assessment tools for participants	40%	0%	27%	20%	13%	3.86	16
Screening of pre-employment participants	27%	7%	13%	40%	13%	2.57	16
Adoption of new services based on learning from SkillWorks	13%	0%	38%	38%	13%	3.71	16
Use of FESS as a goal	36%	21%	7%	29%	7%	3.00	16
Coordination and use of other public workforce development resources	29%	7%	36%	21%	7%	3.86	16

Source: Survey of SkillWorks Partner Organizations.

On the other hand, partners felt that there was limited impact on their organizations' use of pre- and post-training assessment, how they screened participants, and their use of FESS as a goal for their activities.

The interviews and analysis of the partnerships over the past five years also provided evidence of some areas of significant "culture" change in some of the service providers:

- Jewish Vocational Service (JVS)***: Over the course of Phase I of SkillWorks, JVS evolved from a contractor/vendor on a number of partnerships to a lead partner of the Healthcare Training Institute (the organization that took on the activities of the HCRTI at the end of Phase I and became one of the funded partnerships in Phase II of SkillWorks). The learning resulting from the participation in the SkillWorks partnerships, along with a new director with longstanding history in shaping SkillWorks, has resulted in an organization with a stronger orientation to meeting employer needs; to a new understanding of some of the challenges in meeting the needs of low-income residents;

and to a general orientation towards becoming a workforce intermediary in the healthcare sector.

- ***Project Hope:*** When Project Hope began its work with PCWD, it had very limited experience in workforce development and had never worked directly for an employer. As a result of its work with PCWD, Project Hope developed a number of new programs focusing on pipelines for low-income residents into healthcare careers including a *pre-pre-employment* program, a six-week training program to provide the basic skills needed to qualify for a pre-employment program in healthcare. In addition, Project Hope is under contract with Brigham and Women’s Hospital to provide the outreach, recruitment, and screening for entry-level workers to staff its new cardiovascular facility. More importantly, Project Hope’s involvement with PCWD has changed its overall institutional approach to workforce development. It has gained a greater understanding of how to work with an employer and a much deeper appreciation of the specific skills needed in the healthcare sector.
- ***Voice and Future Fund (VFF):*** VFF, the nonprofit educational arm of the SEIU Local 615 union, led the Building Services Career Path project. Through its participation in SkillWorks, VFF has refined a number of its approaches to training. It now realizes the importance of developing an ESOL class with participants at roughly the same level of capability and has expanded courses to offer more levels of ESOL classes; it has moved to a scattered site model to draw more participants at the same skill level; it has increased the number of hours of class time a week for ESOL training; and it has become more strategic in selecting the areas of occupational skill enhancement.
- ***The International Institute (IIB):*** As a result of its involvement with SkillWorks, IIB, the lead partner in the HCC project, has developed the ability to identify employer partners’ priorities and developed a refined understanding of how to manage the logistics of running a program at employer locations. IIB has also learned great lessons about the importance of using data to improve services and performance, leading to a new internal quality control process as well as a new internal tracking and referral system that crosses over from workforce development to other parts of the agency.
- Beyond the SkillWorks Phase I partnerships, the visibility of SkillWorks, as well as the application process itself, was found to have had a broader impact on the larger workforce development community in Boston. The survey of workforce providers who were not involved in Phase I provided evidence that most service providers had gained an increased awareness of many of the principles that have guided SkillWorks. In particular, providers reported that they had an increased understanding of the workforce needs of both employers and low-skilled individuals. (See Table 4.)

The interviewees also reported that, partially due to their exposure to SkillWorks, the workforce development organizations in Boston now had a greater appreciation for the importance of meeting the workforce needs of employers and increased capacity to do so. As one stakeholder noted, “Community organizations have learned how to work with employers in a much deeper way.”

**Table 4: Changes in workforce development practices of organizations not involved in SkillWorks Phase I.**

	No Increase	Very Minor Increase	Minor Increase	Moderate Increase	Significant Increase	Rating	N
Use of data for continuous improvement	7.7%	7.7%	3.8%	42.3%	38.5%	3.96	26
Understanding of the workforce needs of employers	0.0%	7.1%	17.9%	46.4%	28.6%	3.96	25
Understanding of the workforce needs of low-income, low-skilled individuals	7.4%	7.4%	14.8%	33.3%	37.0%	3.85	26
Understanding of the public policy issues most important to workforce development practitioners in Massachusetts	3.7%	7.4%	11.1%	55.6%	22.2%	3.85	26
Level of collaboration with other workforce development organizations	11.5%	3.8%	15.4%	30.8%	38.5%	3.81	27
Capacity to work directly with employers on workforce development activities	16.0%	4.0%	8.0%	32.0%	40.0%	3.76	27
Development of new and effective curriculum for skill enhancement	14.8%	7.4%	7.4%	33.3%	37.0%	3.70	28
Number of partnerships that you have with employers	15.4%	11.5%	3.8%	26.9%	42.3%	3.69	27
Use of career coaching	26.9%	3.8%	7.7%	42.3%	19.2%	3.23	26
Use of FESS as a goal for your clients	30.8%	15.4%	11.5%	30.8%	11.5%	2.77	26
Relationships with community colleges	29.6%	11.1%	18.5%	37.0%	3.7%	2.74	27

Source: Online Survey of 30 Workforce Development Practitioners in Boston.

Note: Responses of those that replied.

Another significant system change that was noted was the increasingly collaborative environment amongst those involved in providing workforce development services. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents reported that, in general, there had been an increase in the level of collaboration in the system; close to 70 percent of those interviewed reported that there was an increase in their organization’s level of collaboration with other workforce development organizations. There is evidence that the new collaborative culture is partially attributable to the activities of SkillWorks. As one respondent noted, “SkillWorks stressed the importance of true partnerships and engaging all stakeholders. Through the process of seeking SkillWorks funding we were gently nudged into forging a closer alliance.”

Participation in the Funders Group affected the grantmaking of individual funders and may have led to some diffusion of best practices, as well as increased capacity amongst service providers. Many funders reported that their participation in SkillWorks has affected some of their funding practices. For example, the public funders now have a better understanding of the philanthropic perspective and are able to leverage public funds for projects that have significant potential. One public funder noted that the relationships built through SkillWorks have helped the funder in its grantmaking. “*Now if I have a grantee that I am concerned about and I know they are also getting foundation support, I have a relationship with the foundation and we will call each other up and try to problem solve together.*” In the past, there was limited knowledge and few personal relationships that crossed the public agency/foundation boundary.

## Employer-Related System Change

SkillWorks set out relatively ambitious goals from its inception related to achieving scale and sustainability. (See sidebar.) There was a clear understanding that success in achieving scale and sustainability could only be achieved if there was increased investment in workforce development on the part of employers in the system.

**SkillWorks Baseline Report:  
Employers' anticipated system changes**

A large number of employers will adopt changes in their human resources, hiring, training, retention, and promotion practices that support career development and advancement of their workforce, and will increase their overall investment in workforce development and training for lower-skilled workers.

**Table 5: Impact of participation in SkillWorks on employers.**

	No Impact 1	→			Significant Positive Impact 5	Avg. of Responses	N
		2	3	4			
Partnerships with workforce development providers	9%	36%	9%	36%	9%	3.82	11
Level of Investment in workforce development services for employees	20%	0%	30%	30%	20%	3.36	11
Understanding of workforce needs of low-income, low-skilled employees	27%	9%	9%	9%	45%	3.30	11
Commitment to advancing existing employees	50%	10%	0%	10%	30%	3.18	11
Relationship with other employers in my industry	18%	0%	9%	27%	45%	3.00	11
Development of new workforce develop services	18%	0%	36%	36%	9%	2.64	11
Development of new recruitment pipelines for entry-level workers	18%	18%	45%	18%	0%	2.60	11

Source: Survey of employer partners in SkillWorks projects.

## SkillWorks Activities Affecting Employers

As part of the system change agenda of SkillWorks, there was the expectation that one way that SkillWorks would “reach scale” would be to have the employer partners involved in the partnerships fully embrace the model and recognize the importance that these workforce investments were having on their bottom line. In some of the partnerships, there was also the hope that the SkillWorks-related activities would lead to changes in the overall “culture” of the human resource-related activities of the employer partners and that successful outcomes amongst individual employer partners would lead to wider adoption of SkillWorks-related goals by other employers in the sector.

Beyond the investments in the partnerships, the WSG focused considerable attention on trying to further engage employers in workforce development. WSG invested in two research projects to better understand the viewpoints of the employer community vis-à-vis workforce development. The goal of this effort was to develop a strategy to increase employment investments in workforce development and get them more involved in the SkillWorks policy agenda. Unfortunately, while an area of concern during Phase I, the research report funded through SkillWorks has not yet been released, and specific activities to engage employers were somewhat limited.

## The Role of SkillWorks in Achieving System Changes amongst Employers

Surveys and interviews with employer partners reveal that the level of impact on employer practices was mixed. About half of the employers did report that their participation in SkillWorks had an impact on their investment in workforce development services for their employees and over half reported that it increased their understanding of the needs of low-income, low-skilled employees and led to the development of new relationships with other employers in their industry. (See Table 5.) However, 60 percent reported that it had no, or very little, impact on their commitment to advancing existing employees and few reported an impact on developing new recruitment pipelines for entry-level workers.

In terms of changes in the “culture” of the employers participating in the partnerships, the analysis of the partnerships did find examples of some system level changes:

- ***Building Services:*** BSCPP played a catalytic role in the creation of a joint union-management training fund in the building services industry. In contract negotiations completed in 2007, commercial employers agreed to fund a joint union-management training program supported by an hourly contribution that will provide ongoing support for educational activities of building services employees. The training fund has a budget of roughly \$300,000 in 2009 and that amount will increase over the course of the contract. BSCPP built support for the fund by serving as a pilot, which demonstrated the value of providing access to education and skills development for immigrant workers with limited English. In addition to the creation of the formal training fund, other changes in employer practices include greater acceptance of paid release time for ESOL classes.
- ***Hospitality:*** Hilton properties, which participated with HCC, implemented substantial changes in its work benefits and policies including expanding tuition reimbursement policies and allowing new employees to participate in training activities immediately upon hire rather than waiting 90 days to be eligible. In addition, many managers have shown an enhanced commitment to employee advancement.
- ***Automotive:*** One employer partner reported that since participating in Partnership for Automotive Career Education (PACE), it had applied for and received a Workforce Training Fund grant to train incumbent employees on customer service representation and preventative maintenance. Involvement in PACE also brought attention to employee language barriers and has led some of the employers to increase their commitments to tutoring and ESOL courses provided through PACE.
- ***Healthcare:*** It is probably within the healthcare sector that the greatest employer culture shifts have been experienced. In the case of PCWD, the employer, Partners Healthcare, was the lead on the project and decided after Year 3 to pursue its own workforce development activities without SkillWorks funding. Today, what was PCWD has shifted from part of the employer’s community outreach activities to a more integrated component of its human resource system. At Brigham and Women’s Hospital, a new storefront workforce office was opened to recruit and screen neighborhood residents and the hospital developed its own internal coaching capacity. Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, a partner in the HCRTI project, has hired a director of workforce development and has established five pipeline programs that train employees for higher paying jobs in

healthcare and the Employee Career Initiative, a service providing one-on-one career and academic counseling and free on-site pre-college and college-level science courses.

Beyond the employers that either participated directly in the SkillWorks partnerships or were in sectors targeted by the SkillWorks partnerships, there is little evidence of any system changes. Efforts by WSG to more broadly engage employers in workforce development policy advocacy did not meet with much success, and little has been done to diffuse the learnings of SkillWorks more broadly in the employer community.

## **Other SkillWorks System Change Impacts**

In addition to the direct impacts that SkillWorks has had on various elements of the workforce development system in Boston, and the Commonwealth as a whole, the activities have also led to some unintended impacts that have some implications for the workforce system. For example, a number of those interviewed noted that private philanthropy now has a more grounded understanding of the state and city workforce development systems. This has provided them with a more realistic and pragmatic approach to addressing the workforce development challenges of the low-income, low-skilled constituency. One funder noted, “I thought I understood the workforce system before, but I did not understand the day-to-day realities. This knowledge has affected our other public policy work.”

The flexible funding and collaborative funding model associated with the SkillWorks Funders Group is one of the more innovative aspects of the Initiative and one that has the potential for some longer-term and sustainable system changes. As one funder noted, “What has changed is that we now have a system funded by a broader coalition of funders including the state. That is a big system change with the state, local, national, and local philanthropies talking on the same page about the importance of workforce development.”

Another indirect system-related outcome of SkillWorks has been the impact it has had nationally on the sector workforce field. SkillWorks served as a model for the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. This \$50 million fund was established in 2007 by several national foundations and the U.S. Department of Labor “to strengthen and expand high-impact workforce development initiatives across the country.” SkillWorks was widely acknowledged as a model for this effort that is now supporting funder collaborative and sector-based workforce partnerships across the U.S.

## **Conclusions**

### **Summary of System Change Outcomes Attributable to SkillWorks**

The evidence suggests that through a combination of the learnings related to participation in the partnerships, a number of the changes that SkillWorks was promoting have begun to be infused more broadly amongst both workforce service providers and employers. Moreover, the public policy activities and the interactions between the public and private funders involved in the Funders Group have also had a broader impact on how workforce development services are being delivered in Boston.

In many ways, however, one would have to conclude that the scale of impacts—in terms of the numbers of low-income individuals achieving family sustaining jobs and the number of employers supporting career advancement for their employees—anticipated by SkillWorks has not been

achieved. To date, sector workforce partnerships remain “boutique” projects within the overall system. While efforts by SkillWorks had led to an overall increase in funding for workforce development, these gains have been offset by difficulties caused by the current fiscal environment. And, the vast majority of employers in Boston have not been touched by the activities of SkillWorks.

Although some of SkillWorks’ more ambitious goals with regard to the scale of participant and employer impact have not been met, there is evidence of positive movement. Specific areas of change attributable to the activities of SkillWorks include:

- ***Institutionalization of WCTF and sector-based career partnerships in the Commonwealth.*** Interest in and experience with sector-based workforce partnerships did not start with SkillWorks. However, there is very strong empirical and anecdotal evidence that this approach to serving the workforce needs of low-income adults and employers has become much more widespread and has gained increased credibility amongst policymakers and practitioners over the past five years. Through Phase I of SkillWorks, the multiple grants provided through the Commonwealth Corporation (through both WCTF and the programs that preceded it), and the application process associated with Phase II of SkillWorks, almost every workforce development provider in the city has been exposed to or has participated in some form of a sector workforce partnership.
- ***Culture changes in individual employer partners.*** Many of the employers who have been involved in the workforce partnerships have learned from this experience and have made some changes in their approach to career advancement for their employees. Of most note, many of those interviewed have cited the significant enhancement of the workforce development activities at two of the city’s acute care hospitals—Beth Israel Deaconess and Brigham and Women’s Hospital. Both of these institutions now have internal workforce development staff and departments that have incorporated many of the principles that SkillWorks has promoted. In most cases, this has been on an individual employer basis. However, these culture changes mean that the actual number of employees who have been impacted by the SkillWorks activities are likely well beyond just those that have participated directly in the SkillWorks-funded programs.
- ***Achieving some level of scale in three targeted sectors.*** Beyond the individual employers, there was widespread consensus that through the efforts of SkillWorks and its investments in three separate partnerships involving healthcare there have been some broader changes on how the healthcare sector in Boston is approaching workforce development, both in terms of new hires and incumbent workers. In addition, the creation of the joint union-management training fund in the building services industry, which is clearly tied to the efforts of the SkillWorks funded partnership, is a significant system change in that sector that will likely greatly increase the scale of workforce development-related training in that sector. While not of the same scale, there has also been an expansion of activity in the city’s hospitality industry, with a growing number of hotels aware of the workforce development needs of their employees and willing to participate in partnerships with community-based groups, unions, and other providers in innovative efforts to develop new career pathways in that sector. Sector efforts with hotels continue to be funded through the WCTF as well as through Phase II of SkillWorks.

- ***Increased adoption of a dual customer approach on the part of workforce development providers.*** The results of the surveys of workforce service providers involved in Phase I of SkillWorks, interviews of the SkillWorks partnerships, as well as the survey of the broader workforce development community indicated that there has been an increased awareness of the importance of serving the needs of employers, as well as an increased capacity to develop education and training programs that meet the needs of employers. Perhaps this is best illustrated by the transition of the Jewish Vocational Services from an organization that had a long history of running ESOL and ABE programs for employers, to more of a workforce intermediary, with specialized expertise in specific sectors, engaging a large number of employers in targeted career pathway efforts.
- ***More alignment between public and private funders with potential to create increased sustainability and scale over time.*** While it is too early to assess the full “system change” impacts associated with the SkillWorks funders group, its sustainability—through the successful launching of Phase II—and the impact that participation is having on the activities of the individual funders, is in itself a system change outcome with strong potential longer-term outcomes.

## Lessons Learned

- ***The need to be more deliberate in the definition of the “system.”*** The whole concept of system change was a moving target throughout the first phase of SkillWorks. While this memo has outlined the initial thinking and evaluated outcomes based upon that thinking, in practice, Phase I suffered to some extent by an evolving notion of system change. For example, many involved in SkillWorks thought “system change” and the public policy work were synonymous. Some believed that the workforce development system primarily referred to legislation and funding affecting the various state agencies. The issue of whether the target for system reform was the state or the city of Boston also emerged as an issue. Finally, as noted in this report, there was never really consensus about whether the community colleges were part of the workforce system change agenda. In general, SkillWorks is not alone. Many of the workforce development programs that have talked about system change have tended to be relatively vague in terms how they were defining the system, the types of changes they were hoping to achieve, and how their specific strategies would lead to these changes.
- ***The need to be more specific about elements of the system that needed to change.*** Related to the above, the system change agenda often talks in broad terms about “continuum of services,” “multiple points of entry,” “dual customer approach,” etc. However, there is lack of clarity about what are the specific system changes that need to be addressed. While there were considerable discussions about state legislation and policy, the actual operations and administration of the existing workforce system infrastructure at the local level was never part of the system change agenda. For example, there has been a general reluctance to address the existing WIA system and how it operates. While this is really the operational workforce development system in the U.S., where much of the federal funding for workforce development flows, there were few specifics about how this system could be changed to improve the outcomes that were outlined by SkillWorks. It is important that the thinking about “system change” dig

deeper into the specific changes that would need to take place at all levels of the system in order to truly provide a “continuum of services” to workers and employers.

- ***Developing a more strategic approach to the interactions of the three components of the Initiative.*** A core part of the SkillWorks theory of change was that system change would be achieved through the interactions of the three legs of the Initiative. More specifically, the public policy agenda was supposed to evolve from the learnings of the partnerships. As SkillWorks was implemented, the public policy component became more opportunistic and immediately moved forward to take advantage of legislative and budgetary opportunities. This resulted in some positive outcomes. In addition, the lead partners in the workforce partnership became more focused on the demands of their day-to-day work—building relationships with employers, developing programs to meet the needs of participants, and managing the process. This made it difficult for them to focus on the policy implications of their work. As a result, a disconnect developed between the work of the partnerships and the public policy activities of WSG. SkillWorks is well aware of this disconnect and in the design and implementation of Phase II is taking a more deliberate approach to the linkages between the various components of the Initiative.
- ***More deliberate focus on disseminating the learnings of the project in the workforce development field and employer community.*** In some ways, the diffusion of many of the learnings into the workforce development provider networks and the employer community was not the result of a deliberate strategy on the part of SkillWorks or the partnerships. Once the capacity building approach of SkillWorks shifted to a focus on the operations of the workforce partnerships, there were few specific activities designed to take some of the learnings of SkillWorks to build capacity more broadly amongst service providers. Similarly, in the case of employers, the diffusion of the learning through the healthcare sector was not the result of a deliberate strategy on the part of SkillWorks. In effect, some of the hospitals learned from some of the failures of the partnerships and incorporated what they learned into a changed workforce development approach. The transition from Phase I to Phase II, along with additional investments in healthcare through the Allied Health Initiative of the Boston Foundation and the state’s WCTF, also brought a broader set of healthcare employers to the table and allowed for additional experimentation around career pathway activities. The question remains whether a more deliberate and strategic approach to building capacity beyond the SkillWorks partnerships could have led to additional scale in terms of the system change impacts on providers and employers.
- ***More strategic approach to addressing the role SkillWorks will play vis-à-vis community colleges and other post secondary educational institutions.*** From the initial phases of SkillWorks there was recognition that community colleges were important potential players in the workforce development arena. And, many of the initial partnerships included representation from the city’s community colleges. However, for many reasons, Phase I of SkillWorks did not focus attention on the role of community colleges within the partnerships or within the workforce system as a whole. Over the past five years, there is growing appreciation of the importance that these institutions, as well as other higher education institutions, play in meeting the career development needs of low-income adults as well as the workforce development needs of the business

community. While there are a number of policy level activities occurring at the state level, no one has taken on the much more difficult issue of culture change within the postsecondary institutions themselves. One potential role for SkillWorks during Phase II could be to work collectively with the partnerships to identify where there are potential “leverage” points in the educational institutions working in the Boston area in order to promote new and more effective working relationships amongst employers, postsecondary education providers, and other workforce system service providers.

## **SEEING OPPORTUNITIES. CREATING SOLUTIONS.**

**SkillWorks**, a public-private partnership, is addressing the needs of employers for more skilled workers and of workers for more and better access to jobs that pay a family-supporting wage.

### **SkillWorks Phase I Funders:**

- **The Annie E. Casey Foundation**
- **Bank of America Charitable Gift Fund and the Frank W. and Carl S. Adams Memorial Fund, Bank of America, N.A., Trustee**
- **Boston 2004**
- **The Boston Foundation**
- **City of Boston's Neighborhood Jobs Trust**
- **The Clowes Fund**
- **Commonwealth of Massachusetts**
- **The Hyams Foundation**
- **The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust**
- **The John Merck Fund**
- **The Paul and Phyllis Fireman Foundation**
- **The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**
- **The Rockefeller Foundation**
- **State Street Foundation**
- **The William Randolph Hearst Foundation**
- **United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley**

*This report was made possible by SkillWorks' funders. The authors thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented are the authors' alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these funders.*