

# Northern Virginia Family Service's Training Futures Program

## *Transformation Through Training: An Overview of the Imaginal Education Model*

### **Introduction**

Training Futures' transformational learning model is called *Imaginal Education*. This holistic approach to learning is the primary driving force responsible for NVFS Training Futures graduates' remarkable 10+ year history of 90% employment outcomes that have nearly doubled their earnings and transformed their lives.

The model is adapted from a unique approach to workforce development originally pioneered by the Institute for Cultural Affairs (<http://www.ica-usa.org>) and a nonprofit workforce development program called Training, Inc. (<http://www.traininginc.org/Home/index.htm>). This approach is unique in the field of job training, and very different from typical college-level career education. The difference can be traced to a compelling theory of personal change which addresses both skills and self-image and results in a life transformation encompassing the whole person.

Imaginal education grew out of the work of Kenneth Boulding, author of *The Image: Life in Knowledge and Society*. In his book, Boulding sets forth five simple precepts for transformational learning:

1. People operate out of images.
2. Images determine behavior.
3. Images are created by messages that can be designed and communicated.
4. Images can change.
5. When images change, behavior changes.

Boulding holds that people have a picture of the world and their place in it, and this picture provides the context for their daily decisions about life, work, and relationships. Successful people have created a picture of competency and abilities, which enables them to turn to new tasks confident of success.

At Training Futures, the predominant self-images among entering trainees are often negative:

- Lack of skills and a U.S. college credential
- Little confidence in one's ability to learn
- Competency struggles, marked by a feeling that "I'm not good enough" for a better job
- An inability to fit in at the workplace

These images often combine to leave trainees feeling "stuck" in a life controlled by others. Given this starting point, our charter is clear: to enhance the trainees' achievement, to build a vision of their place in the world of business, and to enable them to focus on a successful future.

### **Diverse Population**

Each Training Futures cohort serves diverse audiences that form a cohesive support community with rich peer-to-peer teaching and learning from Day 1. Training Futures has adapted the original model designed for unemployed urban residents for under-employed, multi-cultural suburban audiences. A typical cohort will have 18 or more cultures represented. The program strives to combine a diverse group of public assistant recipients and low-to-moderate income adults of all ages; male-female;

American and foreign-born; with widely varying life circumstances. The model has proven its value in serving many audience sub-groups, including:

- **Recent legal immigrants** stuck in low-wage work, hoping to revive the American Dream of success that guided them here.
- **Working poor family breadwinners** without a college degree, living just a couple of missed paychecks away from an eviction notice.
- **Dislocated workers** recently laid off or who experienced a health or another family crisis that cost them their jobs, and needing a skills refresher to enter new careers.
- **Young career-starters** who left high school to find freedom as adults, only to discover themselves trapped in dead-end work and going nowhere, including many single parents.

Observing different styles of dealing with problems and challenges, and being exposed to a variety of perceptions enables people to learn from diversity. Different trainees experience different challenges and victories, and can give and take encouragement. Training Futures graduates become experts in navigating today's increasingly diverse work environments.

### **Business Center Location**

Training Futures utilizes a “total immersion” approach to workplace learning. Trainees are placed in a polished office setting in a central business district with up-to-date equipment. Training Futures is located at the heart of Northern Virginia's business community in Tysons Corner, in an office building mainly occupied by our prestigious corporate partner, Booz Allen Hamilton. The message to trainees is -- “*You are worth this quality investment*”.

There are at least a million subtle things about being part of the central business district that provide learning by assimilation. Training Futures intentionally runs its program to resemble the ways that many businesses run their workplaces, including:

- Timesheets, with sign-in and sign-out procedures
- Progressive discipline policy regarding attendance and behavior
- Supervisor and performance reviews
- Dress code
- Simulated office tasks in the classroom and actual office tasks on internships
- Teamwork environment and team-based projects
- Over 70 volunteers from the business world as tutors and curriculum support

Our business center location combines with these practices to deliver a total experience of being part of the business world. It's like if you are standing at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and nowhere, you may feel that you'll never get an invitation to the business world, but if you are at the center of Northern Virginia's business world, you are already there.

### **Training Methods**

Northern Virginia Family Service's Training Futures program uses a spiral curriculum based on wisdom from the 12-step program and two great philosophers of learning – Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner. We train the whole person with an integrated curriculum that teaches basic, business and life skills simultaneously, not sequentially. The hands-on, learning-by-doing skills approach wakes up minds that have been dulled by boredom, despair or a failure syndrome. Work-based basic skills training gives a new reason to learn because of relevance to a real job. Self-paced incremental success builds an “aha, now I understand” excitement, and present success quickly overcomes past failure.

Life management modules make up one-third of the curriculum and focus on personal mastery skills, a neglected arena for many trainees. Workshops, on time and stress management, health, budgeting money, effective communication tools such as active listening and negotiation, study skills, goal setting, problem solving and life philosophy provide the tools to take charge of their lives and decide ahead of time what happens – prevention versus crisis survival. New skills and habits visibly transform long-held patterns of defeatism and dependency.

Since 2003, Training Futures participants enroll at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), and earn college credits towards a higher education credential while in the program. The 17 college credits that trainees can earn at Northern Virginia Community College open a big door. Trainees traditionally fall into two categories regarding college: they have never seen themselves as college material, or they have given up because of failure in navigating the complicated college entrance and financing processes. Training Futures has been able to incorporate these processes on-site and accomplish them in carefully calibrated steps, with personal support. The message is “as a TF trainee, you are also a college student.” By realizing that they are already succeeding on a “campus” of higher education, trainees’ confidence as adult learners increases, and perceived barriers to college education diminish.

These initial college credits help to expand trainees’ visions of longer-term career goals, many of which are achievable only with a college credential. One recent graduate described her “college” experience at Training Futures: “*Before, it was like looking through binoculars. Now, I have a larger vision... I see new chances.*” They know the impact it will have on their children and their long term career success. After graduation, some graduates immediately continue their college advancement by signing up for NOVA business-oriented night courses, held at Training Futures.

A three week internship after 15 weeks of skills building delivers the proof that each trainee has gained the skills and attributes of a qualified, competent and valuable worker. It’s the imaginal equivalent of “showtime.” Frequently trainees discover that they are as professional and skilled as their counterparts, if not more. Internship supervisors are carefully selected to be supportive while maximizing opportunities for professional growth and skills application. A huge shift in confidence and presentation is obvious when trainees return for the final job search preparation. They have completely mastered the role of a professional office worker because they have already been one. They are equipped with an internship experience as the first job listed on their resume and a supervisor who will be a job reference. They’ve had real-time on the job experience to draw from in their interviews. They know they are ready to land the job and launch their success story.

### **Quotes Bombardment**

One example of the program’s use of unique training methods is how trainers facilitate discussions around quotes. At the beginning of each class section, a motivational quote is placed on the board. That means for a typical six-session day, the trainee is presented with six different positive messages to think about – or 30 new messages a week, 120 a month, and over 500 throughout the entire training cycle. These quotes encompass themes such as the rewards of perseverance, that it is okay to risk, the importance of hard work to achievement, etc. This kind of daily bombardment can really instill a brand new way of viewing life circumstances. As one graduate wrote in a letter to Training Futures supporters, “*the daily quotes literally cleansed my soul.*”

## **Committed Staff**

For many, the supportive, relationship-centered atmosphere created by a caring staff is what makes it possible to stay open to the tough challenges of making changes. As one trainee said: *“the staff saw a winner in me from day one. No one ever believed in me that way before. I decided that I couldn’t let them down, so I gave it my all.”* Training Futures staff sees the good and encourages it.

The staff team meets twice weekly to keep molding team-based instructional strategies to address the needs of individuals and each cohort as they arise. A deeply-discussed, united staff front is a powerful dynamic. Moving from an immediacy mindset to thinking long-range is constantly in process. Supervisors utilize a tough-love method of relating present negative reactions and patterns to a new future that individual has claimed. The question becomes, “how is acting on your first impulse going to affect where you are in 10 years”? In answering this question, the trainees can separate themselves from old habits, which conflict with their new goals. They can soon internalize managing by objectives and coach themselves. Reflective conversations after many presentations help reinforce and deepen learnings of this kind.

## **Final Message**

Graduation is the culminating imaginal event as a final rite of passage into the business world that honors trainees’ achievements and says “you’ve arrived”. It is held as a business luncheon, attended by graduates, volunteers, supporters, and employer-partners at a top hotel such as the Marriott, or a corporate conference center by top sponsors as Inova, SAIC or Gannett. In a moving ceremony, each trainee is introduced to the guests with a short description that holds each one’s uniqueness and achievement. A picture is taken of the moment when the new graduate receives the certificate, and is later combined with their description on a card as a lasting memento. So many congratulatory words are addressed to the graduating cohort by the various guests and speakers that new graduates can never doubt that their accomplishment is significant.

In summary, Training Futures creates a highly-intentional, planned cycle of success which involves a quality of environment that instills positive thinking to build one’s self-image and result in confidence and courage to continue the process.

Changed lives are the credibility of Training Futures. Ask any graduate.

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