

“THEY MADE A PATH FOR US”

A SURVEY OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE LOS ANGELES
UTILITY PRE-CRAFT TRAINING PROGRAM

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FEBRUARY 4 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unionized public sector employment has historically provided workers of color—African Americans especially—with good jobs and long-term economic security. Yet pathways into these jobs can be opaque to less-skilled workers and highly constrained for disadvantaged and nontraditional workers, such as women in blue-collar occupations.

We analyze a union pre-craft training program in Los Angeles designed to open such a pathway by preparing local residents for jobs in the unionized, public utility sector. The Utility Pre-Craft Training (UPCT) program is run by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 18 in coordination with the Department of Water and Power (DWP). Training focuses on skills central to electrical and water-related occupations within the DWP, but workers are also prepared for a range of entry-level jobs located in the public sector broadly. The program initially emerged as part of a community-labor campaign in Los Angeles spearheaded by SCOPE LA and LAANE demanding access for disadvantaged residents to good, public sector jobs in concert with demands to expand “green jobs.”

We conducted a statistically representative survey of past and current UPCT participants and carried out semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a subset of survey respondents. The vast majority (77%) of respondents were people of color; 23% were women. Nearly all program participants reported previous employment in low-wage, unstable, precarious work. Our findings indicate the program’s high rate of success in placing participants, especially people of color and women, into permanent public sector jobs. The vast majority (83%) of past participants secured permanent employment in a public sector job. The overall DWP placement rate among UPCT trainees is 75%. These permanent public sector employees report a high median hourly wage of \$39.15. Wages among relatively lower-paid workers are still high: those at the 25th percentile earn \$30.75. Several past participants have moved up the pay scale quickly into highly skilled jobs: workers at the 75th percentile earn \$47.26.

UPCT PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

LATINO/A	46%	HIRED INTO PUBLIC SECTOR JOB	83%
AFRICAN AMERICAN	26%	HIRED BY DWP	75%
WOMEN	23%	MEDIAN HOURLY WAGE	\$39.15

Every respondent currently employed in a DWP or city job reported that they were better off economically now than they were before the program. All respondents, including the few who had left the program, reported a high level of satisfaction with their UPCT experience. Many respondents described the program as “life-changing.”

We identify the following key characteristics of success:

- Structural linkage between training and a sector with high job standards
- Integrated training and workforce development across the course of workers' pre-hire, pre-craft training experience
- Earn-while-you-learn wage support
- Option to extend training
- Ongoing and inclusive frontline services that extended beyond narrow skills training, including assistance with background checks, test preparation for civil service exams, and advice with dealing with disparate treatment on the worksite
- Demonstrated commitment of union staff and program instructors to trainee success
- Leadership of color and female leadership

Interviews repeatedly emphasized the significance of comprehensive, integrated job training and workforce development services. Participants received intensive classroom training followed by six-month on-the-job rotations in the field. Notably, the program prepared participants for the civil service exam system. The UPCT cultivated a practice among trainees of taking a broad diversity of exams frequently, thus normalizing the exam process and increasing participants' chances of qualifying for job interviews.

Most interviewees commented on how the program prepared them not only for particular jobs, but for a career, arming them with strategies necessary to move ahead in the civil service promotion system. One interviewee remarked, "They [the UPCT] made a path for us.... We didn't see it when we were in the moment, but as we went, we saw."

Interviewees noted the highly engaged and intensive support trainers and union staff provided, from sorting out problems with criminal background checks to providing advice on how to deal with "interpersonal" difficulties on the worksite, usually related to disparate treatment and sexual harassment. Many credited the union official and program director, a black woman, with shaping the tone, tenor, and content of these services. Lastly, interviews revealed the program's cultivation of personal empowerment framed by a workers' rights perspective.

A negative context of reception at field rotation sites posed the greatest challenge to participants. Negative reception was fostered by permanent workers in a number of ways: a reluctance bordering on resistance to share information, forcibly idling trainees (instructions to "stay in the yard" for the day), steering trainees toward menial tasks, teasing, and hazing. This behavior can be viewed as an attempt by permanent workers to "ration training services" especially if they view these services as additional work tasks for which they are not recognized nor compensated.

The high retention rate and successful employment outcomes of the UPCT program position it as a model job training program. Critical to the program's success is its structural linkage to a public sector employer—this requires political commitment on the part of the agency as well as elected officials. Although the comprehensive and integrated training services likely make the program expensive, many components of the program can be effectively translated to serve larger numbers of disadvantaged workers, such as programs aimed at demystifying the civil service exam and hiring process. Lastly, the proactive engagement of inclusive practices by union staff and program instructors realized tangible racial and gender equity outcomes. Assistance at critical junctures helped transition applicants into the program (often the most difficult step), retain them through rotations, and successfully place them into public sector employment. This assistance was both personal and political, from advising trainees on how to adapt to workplace norms to negotiating hiring placements with the DWP.

Finally, cooperation and non-interference with researchers made an objective, representative study possible. Empirical verification of racial and gender equity outcomes requires data transparency—a distinct feature of this model training program.

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Unionized public sector employment has historically provided workers of color—African Americans especially—with good jobs and long-term economic security. Yet pathways into these jobs can be opaque to less-skilled workers and highly constrained for disadvantaged and nontraditional workers, such as women in blue-collar occupations. This report analyzes a union pre-craft training program in Los Angeles designed to open such a pathway by preparing local residents for jobs in the unionized, public utility sector.

The Utility Pre-Craft Training (UPCT) program is a job training program run by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 18 in coordination with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP). Training focuses on skills central to electrical and water-related occupations within the DWP, but workers are also prepared for a range of entry-level jobs located in the public sector broadly. The program initially emerged as part of a community-labor campaign in Los Angeles demanding access for disadvantaged residents of color to good, public sector jobs in concert with demands on the city to expand “green jobs.” RePower LA, a coalition of grassroots community organizations alongside labor partners, led by SCOPE LA and LAANE, worked closely with the IBEW to develop the UPCT. A partnership with the DWP was cultivated, along with a commitment from the city. These stakeholders connected the UPCT to federal economic relief funds, specifically Obama’s Weatherization Program, providing some financial support for the UPCT’s first on-the-job rotation for trainees: weatherization of residential homes in lower income Los Angeles neighborhoods.

The Utility Pre-Craft Training (UPCT) takes up to 50 participants per year, split into two classes. Applicants sign up for the program (known as “signing the book”) at the union hall and are called when a new class opens. Applicants must call back immediately, or lose their place on the list. The program begins with a three-day “boot camp” involving basic math readiness exams and background paperwork. Applicants who pass these exams and the background check then move into the classroom training portion of the program—a three-month course of study focusing on electrical theory and requisite math skills. Finally, participants move into six-month on-the-job field rotations within the DWP, including home weatherization, custodial, warehouse, water, and power rotations. Throughout the rotation portion of the program, participants sit for civil service exams—the first step toward moving out of the program and into full-time employment in the public sector. Participants receive a training wage throughout the duration of their program participation of \$19/hour with a \$7 health insurance subsidy.

DATA AND METHODS

Our study comprised two parts: an online and mail survey of current and past UPCT participants and follow-up semi-structured interviews with a subset of respondents. We received a list of participants with contact information from the union drawn from all but two cohorts (or “classes”) sponsored by the union since the program’s inception in 2011. The union reported that it could not locate participant information for two (Class 1 and Class 9) of the ten classes for which we were given

contact information. Each year, the UPCT sponsors one to two classes of approximately 25 participants. We generated a stratified random sample (stratified by cohort) of 112 potential respondents drawn from the total list of 202 participants, oversampling women in light of their small overall representation (10%) and our interest in gender dynamics within a male-dominated sector. We conducted the survey and follow-up interviews during the summer of 2020. We received 39 completed surveys (30 completed online, 9 through a paper mail-in survey) for a response rate of 34%. Disruptions in the postal service during the survey period likely depressed the response rate, and we did not have either a current postal address or phone number for at least ten respondents. However, these ten respondents and the remaining non-respondents are randomly distributed across the cohorts, attenuating concerns of selection bias. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first statistically representative account of participants' experiences in the UPCT program and their employment outcomes.

DEMOGRAPHICS

UPCT trainees are primarily people of color. Among our survey respondents, 46% identify as Latino/a, 26% as African American/Black, 23% as White, 5% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and one as Native American. We oversampled women, and women disproportionately responded to our survey: 26% were female. Using first names as a guide, we estimate that 10% of the original contact list was female.

UPCT trainees tend to be older, confirming our qualitative finding that nearly all participants find their way to the UPCT after working for many years. Median age among our survey respondents was 39 years (half were older, half younger). The average age was 41 years. Utilizing a checklist of past experiences, 10% of respondents reported a conviction history. Fifteen percent reported being single parents.

A majority of UPCT trainees have educational experience beyond high school. Nearly half (46%) have some college experience but no degree (the largest educational attainment group). Fifteen percent have an Associate's degree, and 10% are college graduates with a Bachelor's degree. Twenty-three percent are high school graduates with either a diploma or GED. Two respondents have a 12th grade education but no diploma. One respondent reported having less than a high school education.

LOW-WAGE WORK AND DEAD-END JOBS: EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCE PRIOR TO THE UPCT

The majority of applicants described their experience prior to entering the UPCT as working low wage jobs, jobs without benefits, and/or temporary jobs or unstable jobs. Interviews confirmed widespread shared experiences of economic precarity, employment instability, and discouragement about future economic prospects. Table 1 summarizes respondents' experiences prior to entering the UPCT. Over half had been working a low-wage job before entering the program, nearly half had jobs with no benefits, one-fifth had jobs that offered too few hours, and over a quarter described their jobs as unstable and/or temporary. Respondents reported other life experiences that posed challenges to securing good jobs: 10% reported a conviction history, 5% reported a history of substance abuse, 15% had been or were single parents, 10% had been stay-at-home parents, and 13% had no prior workforce experience (there is large, but not complete, overlap between these last two categories).

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCES OF UPCT PARTICIPANTS PRIOR TO PROGRAM

RESPONSE OPTION	PERCENT
LONG PERIOD OF UNEMPLOYMENT	18%
LOW-WAGE JOB	56%
JOB WITH TOO FEW HOURS	21%
JOB WITHOUT BENEFITS	46%
WORKED MORE THAN ONE JOB AT THE SAME TIME	13%
NO EXPERIENCE IN WORKFORCE	13%
UNSTABLE AND/OR TEMPORARY WORK	28%
CONVICTION HISTORY	10%
SUBSTANCE ABUSE HISTORY	5%
SINGLE PARENT	13%
STAY-AT-HOME PARENT	10%

NOTE: RESPONDENTS COULD CHECK MULTIPLE RESPONSES.

UPCT participants were employed in an array of industries and occupations before entering the program, ranging from fast-food to warehouse to frontline human services—all mapping closely to the contours of low-wage work in the U.S. labor market. Jobs fell into the following broad categories: administrative/customer service (13%), laborer (28%), food service (10%), other (26%; e.g., security, political canvassing), and not working (23%). Table 2 summarizes these findings.

TABLE 2. JOB IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO ENTERING PROGRAM

INDUSTRY/OCCUPATION	PERCENT	SPECIFIC RESPONSES INCLUDE
ADMINISTRATIVE	13%	Customer service, frontline human services
LABORER	28%	Warehouse, construction, assembly, custodial
FOOD SERVICE	10%	Waiter, fast-food, hospitality (hotel)
OTHER	26%	Security, canvassing, vaguely described or no response
NOT WORKING	23%	Stay-at-home parent, student

A motivation to secure permanent, predictable employment that provided benefits was universally expressed by all interviewees as their primary reason for pursuing the UPCT. Interviewees described being discouraged by their employment experiences and their anxiety for longer term economic security. This was a constant, recurrent theme that emerged across all interviews, often repeatedly. Participants came to the UPCT from a diverse set of experiential backgrounds. For some participants, the UPCT was their first experience with intensive training and stable employment. For others, the UPCT came on the heels of longer careers in industries that relied on unpredictable employment (e.g., construction) or in industries undergoing restructuring related to outsourcing and downsizing. A few interviewees had lost jobs or been laid off after extensive employment tenures in such industries. Interviewees who had work histories in low-wage work expressed the toll of such jobs: long hours, long commutes, few to no benefits, miniscule raises with no promotion opportunities in sight.

For those interviewees with some college experience, many viewed the UPCT and a blue-collar job in the public sector as providing a greater opportunity for stable work and good pay than white-collar jobs in the private sector. One participant realized the precariousness of the private sector when he witnessed layoffs happening while working in the corporate financial sector and decided it was time

to find something more stable. Despite completing nearly half of his Bachelor's degree, this interviewee was especially motivated to enter the UPCT because he saw how people he knew with "very good" college degrees were not getting jobs and struggling.

The sense of relief at finding the UPCT was palpable during our interviews. A few interviewees pointed to major life events that catalyzed their search for a different economic pathway: several interviewees referenced pending college for their children, a few the birth of a child, one the specific health needs of a child (and the quest for health benefits), and another the deaths of a partner and parent. For others, the UPCT was an important opportunity to positively reconstruct their life. The program provided a pathway out of the low wage sector, or unemployment, and towards bettering one's life without having to obtain a college degree or concerns around potential hindrances to hiring, such as a criminal background, inexperience, and other conditions that foreclose low-income communities of color from higher-wage labor sectors.

Participants' knowledge of the particular aspects of the UPCT or of work opportunities in the public sector ran the gamut from participants following in the footsteps of close friends or relations who had been in the program to respondents who knew relatively little, if anything, about the UPCT and/or DWP work. Yet all had impressions that a job with the city or the DWP was an exceptionally good job and, above all, a secure job.

FROM PRECARIETY TO "PERMANENT": EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES OF UPCT PARTICIPANTS

The UPCT program is highly successful, measured by the employment outcomes of participants and the specific placement rate into DWP and City jobs. Excluding the three survey respondents currently in the UPCT program, 83% of all respondents were hired into public sector jobs (30 of 36). Of these 30 workers, two-thirds were hired into DWP jobs immediately out of the UPCT program (n=20). Eight were hired by the City of Los Angeles. Five of these city workers later moved into positions with the DWP. Currently, 26 former UPCT participants are full-time DWP employees (one worker has since left the DWP for a union job in the private sector); three are full-time employees with the City of Los Angeles. Two current DWP employees moved into adjacent and more highly specialized training programs (e.g., the challenging lineman apprenticeship) from the UPCT and then into permanent positions—a term frequently used by respondents in both the survey and interviews, as in "I'm permanent now." The overall DWP placement rate among UPCT trainees is 75%.

Former UPCT trainees hold a number of different occupations within the DWP and the City ranging from clerical and custodial positions to meter readers, electric station operators, and journeyman lineman. This range illustrates the successful practice within the UPCT program of encouraging trainees to sit for a high number and broad scope of civil service exams and the relevance of the program's generalized training, particularly classroom preparation, to a wide set of skills demanded by positions within the DWP. We asked respondents to report both their first and current occupations within the DWP and the City (Table 3). The responses point to occupational mobility already at play among former trainees. Interviews corroborate these patterns, as well as indicate the degree to which many workers are highly satisfied with their entry-level positions. For example, one worker started as a customer service representative and moved up to become a billing specialist. Of the three workers who started as meter readers, one is now an electrical distribution helper, another a water service worker, and one remains a meter reader. The steamplant assistant is now a plant equipment operator. One electric station operator has become a lineman apprentice. One electrical mechanic trainee has become a journeyman lineman (the highest paid respondent in our sample).

TABLE 3. FIRST AND CURRENT OCCUPATIONS OF FORMER UPCT PARTICIPANTS EMPLOYED AT DWP

Same workers represented within each row, indicating any changes from first to current occupation

FIRST DWP POSITION	COUNT	CURRENT DWP POSITION (COUNT)
ADMINISTRATIVE CLERK	1	Electrical Mechanic Trainee (1)
ELECTRICAL CRAFT HELPER	3	Electrical Craft Helper (1); Electrical Construction Electrical Craft Helper 3 Mechanic (1); Warehouse & Toolroom Worker B (1)
ELECTRICAL CRAFT HELPER B	1	Electrical Craft Helper A (1)
CUSTODIAN	3	Custodian (3)
CUSTOMER SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE	1	Billing Specialist (1)
ELECTRIC STATION OPERATOR	4	Electric Station Operator (3); Lineman Apprentice (1)
ELECTRICAL MECHANIC TRAINEE	3	Electrical Mechanic Trainee (2); Journeyman Lineman (1)
LINEMAN APPRENTICE	1	Groundman (1)
MAINTENANCE & CONSTRUCTION HELPER	2	Maintenance & Construction Helper (2)
METER READER	3	Meter Reader (1); Electrical Distribution Helper (1); Water Service Worker (1)
STEAM PLANT ASSISTANT	1	Plant Equipment Operator (1)
STOREKEEPER	1	Storekeeper (1)
WAREHOUSE & TOOLROOM WORKER	3	Warehouse & Toolroom Worker (2); Storekeeper (1)

Former UPCT trainees now employed in the public sector enjoy good wages and benefits. The median hourly wage of all respondents currently working for the DWP or the City of Los Angeles is \$39.15—half of all these workers earn more than this median wage, half earn less. The 25th percentile (25% of respondents earn less, 75% earn more) wage is \$30.75. The in the public sector enjoy good wages and 75th percentile hourly wage (25% of respondents have higher wages) is \$47.26. The range between the 25th and 75th percentiles illustrates a phenomenon called “wage compression,” a term used to describe a relatively low level of wage inequality among workers. Significantly, the 25th percentile wage is a relatively high hourly wage at \$30.75. These wage statistics indicate that entry-level jobs for trainees coming out of the UPCT program pay a middle-class wage, and workers have opportunities to advance up the pay scale.

Interviewees repeatedly referenced this internal labor market, even if they did not have plans to continue sitting for promotional exams. One interviewee described his pathway from UPCT to a job with the City of Los Angeles to his current position in the DWP. Initially, this UPCT participant turned down two job offers with the city because his goal was a DWP job and its relatively higher wages (job location and longer commutes were also a factor). Nudged by the program, he accepted a city job when offered one a third time, confident it would provide a good position from which to gain more experience and seniority while continuing to take civil service exams for DWP positions. After one year with the city, he landed four interviews with the DWP. He chose his current position at a wage \$10 higher than his city job. Likely because of this mobility success, this worker expressed a high level of satisfaction with his current position and ambivalence toward future promotions: “Maybe

supervisor, if that works out. If not, I'll just stay [in my current job]. Yeah, where I'm at right now works for me." Far from resigned, this worker characterized his current employment situation as a huge success coming at the end of a long period of unstable employment following the layoff from a large private sector employer (a job he never expected to leave), an unsuccessful attempt at self-employment, low-wage work as a security guard, on-again, off-again course work at a community college, and a three- year wait on the UPCT list. His labor market experience was a familiar one among our respondents.

Survey respondents employed in the public sector reported robust employment benefits. From a specified list, all public sector workers reported receiving retirement, family health insurance, paid vacation, paid holidays, and paid sick leave. Most workers also reported paid family leave, but as no clear pattern emerged between workers who checked this benefit and those that did not (e.g., DWP v. City), we believe this benefit is likely available to all workers but many are unfamiliar with it. A few respondents wrote in additional benefits, including mileage, time off for doctor's appointments and personal family time, vision coverage, and floating holidays. Lastly, many interviewees commented on the importance of overtime pay. Some actively sought overtime ("I'm putting aside future mortgage payments."). Others were relieved to receive it when working overtime was required. Interviewees resoundingly emphasized benefits as a critical aspect of not only their current jobs, but as a primary motivation for entering the UPCT program. Benefits came up again and again as a central theme, with several interviewees noting that they willingly took a pay cut to enter the UPCT program in exchange for the possibility of public sector employment and its attendant benefits.

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Above all, participants stressed the security a public sector job provided them. A majority of survey respondents used the word "security" in their open-ended write-in responses. Nearly every interviewee stressed this aspect of public sector employment. A few commented that they would forgo, or had foregone, higher wages in exchange for the predictability and security of a DWP or city job. One interviewee said, "This job was life changing for me. You know what I'm saying. I'm secure." This sentiment was commonly expressed, often stressed, and sometimes emotionally conveyed. The six participants who left the UPCT program reported the following reasons: two left because they could not pass the required electrical classroom exams (one female, one male); one left due to a DUI; one due to injury; two left due to ongoing family health and long-term care needs (one female, one male). Of these latter two respondents, one reported that they are currently taking exams for DWP

openings as they are now able to re-enter the labor force. This individual reported that they had “completed” the UPCT program and felt prepared to sit for exams and apply for jobs. Notably, the respondent who resigned because of a DUI commented on the high value of the program and voiced regret for not being able to continue. In sum, one-third of trainees who left the program left because they were unable to meet internal benchmarks. The remainder left for reasons external to the program (e.g., personal) which were disqualifying or for which accommodations were not possible.

PARTICIPANTS’ ASSESSMENT OF UPCT

The successful employment outcomes of UPCT participants correspond with respondents’ assessment of the program: 72% ranked the UPCT as “excellent”; 26% as “very good”; and 5% as “good.” Of the eight participants who left the program before completion, all ranked the program as “excellent.” 82% reported being “very prepared” for future employment; the remainder reported being “somewhat prepared.”

All interviewees expressed positive assessments of their UPCT experience. Many went further, describing the program as “life changing.” They viewed the program as enabling them to provide for their families (a common refrain) and ensure their economic security. One survey respondent who was not currently working due to an injury (and whom we did not interview) wrote, “The program gave me hope again. I [was] just about to give up and I thought I could not do better for myself. This was the BEST JOB I ever had in my whole life.”

THE UPCT PROGRAM FROM THE UPCT TRAINEE PERSPECTIVE

Interviews repeatedly emphasized the significance of comprehensive, integrated job training and workforce development services. Participants received intensive classroom training covering basic math to advanced electrical concepts. Upon completion of this training, participants moved into six-month on-the-job rotations in the field, working alongside permanent DWP employees. Classroom convenings continued throughout these rotations, preparing participants for new rotations and delivering training modules on topics ranging from occupational health and safety to sexual harassment. Notably, the program exposed participants to and prepared them for civil service exams. The program regularly alerted participants to upcoming exams, provided study guides, encouraged the formation of study groups, and staged mock interviews. Most interviewees commented on how the program as a whole prepared them not only for particular jobs, but for a career, arming them with strategies necessary to move ahead in the civil service promotion system. As one interviewee remarked, “They [the UPCT] made a path for us.... We didn’t see it when we were in the moment, but as we went, we saw.”

CLASSROOM TRAINING

Classroom training over a period of three months focused on basic and intermediate math skills with an emphasis on moving through the Hayden electrical course. Many respondents across the interviews and survey reported struggling with math, many identifying the math portion of the UPCT program as the most difficult aspect of the program. But these same respondents also praised the program for providing excellent classroom instruction as well as additional learning supports such as tutoring. A couple of respondents criticized the program for not providing enough support, one in

elation to a learning disability. One math instructor was fondly remembered by many respondents, some remembering him by name, some not, but all commenting on his passion and ability to breakdown complex ideas. One respondent noted that he had not taken advantage of all of the support provided by the program and acknowledged that he likely would have had an easier time with the classroom training had he done so.

Respondents reported on additional programming provided by the union through the classroom venue, although recollection of different topics was uneven among respondents. For example, all interviewees reported high quality occupational health and safety training while only one recalled a sexual harassment training. As a group, the female interviewees praised the extra programming provided by female union staff and union representatives specifically to them. They highly valued “advice” sessions, such as informal discussions about how to address challenges associated with a male-dominated worksite, ranging from harassment to being proactive in requesting harder work assignments. In particular, all female interviewees expressed high praise, admiration, and gratitude for the efforts of an African American female labor leader on their behalf. This union official was held in high esteem as a role model and advocate. She was often cited as being instrumental to their own perseverance and success. Lastly, she was viewed as the face of the union by many of these women and a critical source of their union pride.

ON-THE-JOB ROTATIONS

Upon completion of classroom training, UPCT trainees move to six-month on-the-job field rotations. These rotations are completed on active DWP job sites alongside permanent employees. Rotations range from home weatherization, warehouse, custodial, landscaping, power, and water (including laying pipe). The field rotations were clearly instrumental to UPCT participants’ training and experience and were universally acknowledged as transformative. Yet UPCT participants reported their most negative experiences in the program occurring on rotations. Every interviewee described uneven contexts of receptions across their field rotations, and several survey respondents commented on both negative and positive experiences in write-in responses.

Positive experiences included gaining new skills, applying and honing incipient skills, learning the scope of DWP activities and jobs, appreciating a new environment, and building their own reputation among permanent employees. Participants comprehended the pipeline aspect of the UPCT program when working on rotations and gained an understanding of the DWP as a large organization. Additionally, many interviewees welcomed this new life experience and challenge: meeting new people, being successful in physically demanding jobs, becoming one of the crew, and building their reputation by gaining respect from the permanent workers. UPCT participants felt like they could prove themselves by working hard, and once they integrated themselves with the LADWP workers, they felt it was both an invaluable and positive experience. Every interviewee reported being positively received by at least one job site. They recalled permanent workers who had been friendly, helpful, and supportive. Critical to this assessment was whether information about the job tasks and workflow was freely shared—“proactive” was a word used by one interviewee to describe the specific ways in which other workers were helpful. One interviewee described the practice of some permanent workers “adopting” UPCT trainees, particularly when they witnessed their co-workers’ “bad behavior” toward trainees.

This behavior, and a general negative stance toward UPCT participants, emerged as a central and consistent theme across interviews and was frequently the topic of write-in comments on the survey. Respondents described a sense of resentment, and sometimes hostility, on the part of permanent employees toward trainees. UPCT trainees were made to feel that they were a burden in need of “babysitting” (a term used by several interviewees). One respondent put it this way :

And then you coming into a field where all these guys, they know what they're doing, you know—water-side, power-side, underground. I mean, there's landscaping, there's a lot, there's a lot of jobs out there, you know. So, for us coming in like real green and these guys kind of like feeling like they got to babysit us or something.

Respondents described a work culture where knowledge garners respect—an ethos they embraced. However, the other side of this cultural norm often worked against trainees: a lack of knowledge equated to a lack of respect. Respondents bristled at this double-edge. They recognized that they were “green” (a common descriptor) and made no pretense at being otherwise. As many pointed out in their interviews, they knew they were unskilled, but that was exactly why they were in the UPCT program. They were open to being taught and frustrated when they were denied instruction. This not only undercut the training objective, but also took an emotional toll on the trainees, who consistently felt lost. On field rotations, UPCT participants felt discriminated against for being UPCTs and felt excluded. This made training slower and less efficient, and left the UPCT workers feeling powerless.

Interviewees relayed several concrete examples of this negative reception in practice. One respondent described being paired with a permanent employee who, upon introduction, told him, “I prefer to work alone.” This statement immediately set the tone of a one-sided relationship that persisted throughout the rotation. The permanent employee never freely offered information nor advice to the UPCT trainee about how to best carry out work tasks, even going so far as to turn off his cellphone when the trainee arrived on the worksite awaiting instructions. As a result, the trainee would be forcibly idle while attempting to locate his partner. Forced idleness was a common experience. UPCT trainees were often told to “stay in the yard” for the day. At the other extreme, UPCT participants were given make-work tasks to keep them busy, such as digging an unneeded trench. Taken as a whole, these behaviors can be understood as a form of service rationing among permanent employees. They deployed a range of tactics that limited, or fully withheld, their training services—their instruction, advice, and feedback.

On top of this general discrimination based on their newcomer status, some UPCT participants experienced additional discrimination along racial and gender lines, which included verbal ridicule, “teasing,” and purposeful neglect. Many women described being treated differently because they were women, or experienced overly masculinist behavior. Forced idleness was experienced primarily by women and sometimes paternalistically justified as “going easy” on the women. Frequently, women were steered to “easier” tasks, denying them the opportunity to gain new skills and improve. Teasing was also commonly reported, especially around tasks meant to embarrass women for their lack of knowledge, such as requests to procure imaginary tools.

All of the trainees that felt neglect also felt like they were not learning and were not empowered to make a change. While most of the interviewees mentioned a lack of oversight on the field rotations, they realized they could take their complaints up the ladder, but not without fear of being viewed in a negative light by permanent workers or management. These negative experiences led to UPCT participants questioning themselves and their place in the UPCT and LADWP. Upholding a reputation

of being an easy-going hard worker was important. However, while a majority said “proving themselves” helped them in the overall experience, or getting through a challenging scenario, it was unclear how one proved one’s self and how long it took, which resulted in a confusing, negative experience. Women also used this as a way to “prove themselves” not just to others, but to themselves.

In our interviews, respondents re-framed these negative experiences as personal challenges they successfully surmounted. Never condoning the negative behavior they experienced, respondents viewed their resolve to withstand negative treatment with both individual and collective pride. They had endured and “come out on top.” They relayed gaining a new set of “people skills” as well as learning how to better negotiate workplace politics. This included gaining a sense of worker voice that stemmed from an understanding of collective representation through the union. One female respondent described her decision to raise an issue of harassment with the foreman at the job site. She said she felt empowered to speak out because she knew the union would be behind her. The issue was resolved to her advantage: she was re-assigned to an African American supervisor who she described as incredibly knowledgeable, patient, and respectful. She identified this experience as a highlight of her field rotation experience.

Many respondents connected these negative experiences to their shared experience as UPCT participants and to a sense of collective pride. They felt an obligation to help other UPCTs behind them and recognized the accomplishments of UPCT participants ahead of them. One respondent described this combined sense of motivation, pride, and obligation in the following statement:

I got to meet people that got hired onto the department, and they were from Class 1, Class 5, you know that. You know, when I saw those guys out there, man, it was ... it was a good feeling. Man, because they know what we are going through, right. So, every time I told a few guys in my class, “You know, man, every time we see a UPCT after us, like we should help them like the most that we can, you know.”

Overwhelmingly, the field rotations were viewed as a place to build skills, and despite the negative experiences, led to boosting one's sense of self in the program and beyond.

CIVIL SERVICE EXAMS AND BEYOND

Most public sector jobs in the County and City of Los Angeles require applicants to take a civil service exam. These exams are offered periodically, in concert with job openings. Applicants must achieve a minimum “certification” score before they are eligible to be added to an interview list. A certification score does not guarantee an interview, as only the top few candidates are called for interviews during the hiring process. A higher exam score will position an applicant higher on the list, but other factors, such as seniority, also contribute “points” that factor into an applicant’s position on the list.

The UPCT program deploys a highly effective approach to the civil service exam system: condition participants to take many exams, frequently. The UPCT de-mystifies the county and city hiring system for participants by regularly alerting participants to upcoming exams, providing study guides, encouraging the formation of study groups, and staging mock interviews. Our survey revealed the consistency of this practice: respondents reported taking five civil service exams, on average. The frequency of exam-taking across participants is highly skewed—roughly half of all respondents took

ten or more exams. In addition to this strategy, UPCT participants were encouraged by the program to take the first public sector job they were offered and to continue taking exams. Seniority points would assist them in gaining a higher position on future job lists. Table 4 reports the total number of exams, by exam, taken by survey respondents (respondents reported all exams taken and the number of times they took each exam)

TABLE 4. TYPE AND NUMBER OF CIVIL SERVICE EXAMS TAKEN

CIVIL SERVICE EXAM	NUMBER OF EXAMS TAKEN (BY ALL RESPONDENTS)
ELECTRICAL CRAFT HELPER	33
WAREHOUSE AND TOOLROOM WORKER	29
MAINTENANCE AND CONSTRUCTION	28
HELPER ELECTRICAL MECHANIC TRAINEE	24
ELECTRIC METER SETTER	20
STEAMPLANT ASSISTANT	15
CUSTOMER SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE	13
WATER UTILITY WORKER	5
OTHER: NOT SPECIFIED	15

SUPPORT PRACTICES

Interviewees noted the highly engaged and intensive support trainers and union staff provided, from sorting out problems with criminal background checks to providing advice on how to deal with “interpersonal” difficulties on the worksite, usually related to disparate treatment and sexual harassment. Many credited the union official and program director, a black woman, with shaping the tone, tenor, and content of these services. Lastly, interviews revealed the program’s cultivation of personal empowerment framed by a workers’ rights perspective.

The experiences of participants with past conviction records demonstrate the intensive support provided by union representatives. One participant, referencing a “rocky past,” commented on the sustained and thorough support union representatives provided in addressing issues related to her background check from entry into the program all the way through the hiring process with the DWP. This participant expressed great anxiety when filling out the initial background paperwork for the program. A union representative reassured her, stressing “just be honest,” walking her through all parts of the paperwork. When this participant was later hired by the DWP, she was summarily fired without warning and escorted off the job three weeks into her employment. She expressed being “utterly devastated.” A technicality that had arisen in her original background check had arisen again, despite the union’s prior success at resolution. She called the union official in charge of the UPCT, an African American woman, who immediately took up her case. After several weeks, the issue was resolved once again, and the participant was reinstated into her permanent position. This participant expressed gratitude for the union official’s efforts as well as the union: “They [the union] always had my back. I’m glad I’m a part of a union ... they work so hard for you.”

The instrumental effect of ongoing and inclusive frontline support services provided by union staff and trainers was echoed by all interviewees and mentioned in many survey write-in comments. Participants remained in the program in large part because of this support, particularly at moments when they felt on the verge of quitting. Notably, many interviewees described the high level of structure and strict discipline as being critical factors to their success in the program. The no-nonsense atmosphere coupled with individualized support, when requested, cultivated a sense of purpose and resolve. Other interviewees described additional programming and events sponsored by the union as providing a sense of purpose and belonging, such as union charity drives.

The training wage was critical. All interviewees noted that they would not have been able to participate in the program if it were unpaid. The additional wage subsidy for health insurance was mentioned by several as making the difference between having insurance or not. The open-ended length of the program (participants can extend their enrollment without penalty) was also a significant factor for participants, providing a sense of security while actively sitting for exams and waiting for interviews. The average time in the program was just over 34 months; the median duration was 32 months.

Lastly, the continuation of paid program participation during the pandemic and strict Covid-19 workplace protective practices implemented by the DWP had a pronounced effect in our survey: not a single respondent reported being unemployed, underemployed, or ill during the pandemic.

GETTING IN: SOCIAL NETWORKS, SIGNING THE BOOK, AND THE LONG WAIT

The UPCT is a highly effective training program with a demonstrated high retention rate and high placement rate of participants into permanent public sector jobs. The program is small, likely a factor contributing to the sustainability of its depth of training and overall success. As a result, demand greatly outstrips supply resulting in very long waits for applicants to enter the program. On average, surveyed participants spent just under three years (34.3 months; median=33 months) on the UPCT wait list from the time they first “sign the book” to matriculation. The shortest wait was 15 months (from an early cohort); the longest was 6.5 years (this individual was unable to start the program when their name first came up, moving them to the back of the list). A majority of the people got through this period by working low- wage jobs; a few continued taking college courses.

The perseverance necessitated to stay on the list—which requires actively re-signing the book every three months—speaks directly to participants’ deep desire and motivation to improve their economic position through public sector employment. Those working more stable jobs while on the wait list still felt the precariousness of the labor market. People understood that the LADWP provided secure jobs with benefits, and therefore the UPCT became an important pipeline for people to get into the public sector. One interviewee commented, “I don't go to church, but I dedicated myself to signing my name on that damn book. I was like, I want a job like, I want, I mean it's with Water and Power, they can't get any better than that.”

Most participants learn about the program through word-of-mouth. Nearly all respondents reported learning about the UPCT through a friend or family member (87%). The remainder learned about the program through SCOPE LA or a union member who they did not identify as a friend or family member. Three-quarters of the “friend or family” social contacts were union members.

Despite minimal promotion, the wait list remains long. A byproduct of its success is the limited profile the program has among the larger public and potential applicants—the program does not need to advertise and risks being overwhelmed if it does. Over time, an increasing number of participants learn about the program from current employees or UPCT participants. In the initial years of the program, a few participants had learned about the program through other venues, such as community organizations (e.g., SCOPE LA).

Although participants primarily learn about the UPCT program through friends and family, the majority knew little to nothing about the nuts-and-bolts of the program nor about specific jobs or required skills within the DWP. A majority of interviewees described a process of asking people they knew about job opportunities who happened to either be DWP employees or union members. One respondent described being invited to dinner by a friend of his spouse. The respondent was struck by the hosts' home and standard of living. He bluntly asked, "What do you do that you can afford this?" The host was a DWP employee who knew about the UPCT and shared information about the program. Three respondents learned about the program through SCOPE LA, a community organization. Each one described hearing about the UPCT as a way to get into a city job, but none knew details about what the UPCT entailed or what sort of jobs it could lead to. Each expressed, sometimes profoundly, their gratitude for getting connected to the UPCT and their uniformly positive experience in the program. For a couple of participants, a friend who had been in the UPCT program proactively recommended the program and encouraged their application.

KEY FINDINGS

The high retention rate and successful employment outcomes of the UPCT program position it as a model job training program. We identify the following key characteristics of success:

- Structural linkage between training and a sector with high job standards
- Integrated training and workforce development across the course of workers' pre-hire, pre-craft training experience
- Earn-while-you-learn wage support
- Option to extend training
- Ongoing and inclusive frontline services that extend beyond narrow skills training, including assistance with background checks, test preparation for civil service exams, and advice with dealing with disparate treatment on the worksite
- Demonstrated commitment of union staff and program instructors to trainee success
- Leadership of color and female leadership

Interviews repeatedly emphasized the significance of comprehensive, integrated job training and workforce development services. Participants received intensive classroom training followed by six-month on-the-job rotations in the field. Notably, the program prepared participants for the civil service exam system. The UPCT cultivated a practice among trainees of taking a broad diversity of exams frequently, thus normalizing the exam process and increasing participants' chances of qualifying for job interviews.

Most interviewees commented on how the program prepared them not only for particular jobs, but for a career, arming them with strategies necessary to move ahead in the civil service promotion system. One interviewee remarked, "They [the UPCT] made a path for us.... We didn't see it when we were in the moment, but as we went, we saw."

Interviewees noted the highly engaged and intensive support trainers and union staff provided, from sorting out problems with criminal background checks to providing advice on how to deal with "interpersonal" difficulties on the worksite, usually related to disparate treatment and sexual harassment. Many credited the union official and program director, a black woman, with shaping the tone, tenor, and content of these services. Lastly, interviews revealed the program's cultivation of personal empowerment framed by a workers' rights perspective.

Critical to the program's success is its structural linkage to a public sector employer— this requires political commitment on the part of the agency as well as elected officials. Although the comprehensive and integrated training services likely make the program expensive, many components of the program can be effectively translated to serve larger numbers of disadvantaged workers, such as programs aimed at demystifying the civil service exam and hiring process. Lastly, the proactive engagement of inclusive practices by union staff and program instructors realized tangible racial and gender equity outcomes. Assistance at critical junctures helped transition applicants into the program (often the most difficult step), retain them through rotations, and successfully place them into public sector employment. This assistance was both personal and political, from advising trainees on how to adapt to workplace norms to negotiating hiring placements with the DWP.

A negative context of reception at field rotation sites posed the greatest challenge to participants. Negative reception was fostered by permanent workers in a number of ways: a reluctance bordering on resistance to share information, forcibly idling trainees (instructions to “stay in the yard” for the day), steering trainees toward menial tasks, teasing, and hazing. This behavior can be viewed as an attempt by permanent workers to “ration training services” especially if they view these services as additional work tasks for which they are not recognized nor compensated. Permanent workers may also view UPCT participants as a competitive threat or as unworthy recipients. At worse, these behaviors may be driven by prejudicial views. However, this study cannot ascertain the basis for these behaviors, only the effect on training participants.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

We conclude with feedback we received from interviewees and survey respondents about how to improve the program. A summary of UPCT participant recommendations follows:

- More safety training before being put on rotations. Although many UPCT participants felt they received ample safety training, a few recommended additional safety training before specific rotations or safety training tailored to a rotation.
- Emphasize to applicants the need to practice math and sign up for math classes. Math was consistently raised as one of the biggest challenges and frustrations people had with the program. Although the IBEW provides materials for prospective UPCT participants, respondents thought the program should more strongly recommend math preparation prior to entering the program (e.g., practice at home, take classes). Additionally, respondents suggested distributing more structured math preparation materials.
- Paid family leave and benefits for family. Multiple respondents spoke of the need for family benefits, as well as the ability to take family leave with pay. Although they recognized the program is a training program, they expressed a desire for more support for UPCT participants with family care responsibilities. A few respondents specifically wanted allowances to take a day off for family matters.
- A checklist of what should be learned at the different rotations. A checklist would help UPCT trainees better manage what they should learn by the end of their rotation as well as become more familiar with the jobsite at the outset of the rotation. Additionally, a checklist could help make UPCT trainees and LADWP workers accountable for specific skills that should be taught and performed on the jobsite.

- Shadow trainers/managers on rotations. Respondents stated that it would be helpful to have an authority figure whom they could call upon to discuss and/or address issues that arise on rotations. These figures would also follow the progress of UPCT trainees, including checking in about the field site experience to ensure optimal training.
- Buy-in from LADWP workers. Respondents felt the program lacks buy-in from LADWP employees on rotations which leads to uneven experiences and suboptimal learning. In addition to having worksite “managers,” respondents noted that having supportive LADWP workers would ensure more consistent and positive experiences.
- Shorten timing between rotations and exams. Given the sporadic nature of exam opportunities, respondents commented on the challenge of retaining specific information from a rotation when taking a related exam in the future. One recommendation was to sit for an exam after finishing a rotation so that when a job opens, the exam is on file. Another suggestion was to offer employment, if there is an immediate opening, to the UPCT trainee on the site. Although we recognize the limitations and restrictions that likely face this suggestion, we think it is important to highlight the tension that some participants feel exist between rotation performance and obtaining positions with the LADWP.
- Stronger culture of professionalism. A few participants felt that the UPCT program would cultivate a stronger culture of professionalism if it were stricter with participants. By contrast, many respondents characterized the program as “strict,” often conveyed positively but in a few cases negatively (as in overly strict).
- Better location choices for rotations. This recommendation emphasizes the geographical challenges UPCT participants felt in getting from their residence to the job site.
- Ability to stay at a rotation if performing well. Participants felt that just as they were adapting to a rotation, they were moved. One recommendation was to provide an option to extend one’s time at a rotation. Similarly, some trainees felt there were too many rotations. By contrast, a majority of respondents said that requiring multiple rotations was useful, particularly for identifying jobs most suitable to the participants’ aptitudes and skills.
- Career mentoring. While trainees praised instructors and tutors, as well as the holistic nature of the program, several recommendations were made to bolster guidance and career planning services. One suggestion was a career orientation to LADWP at the outset of the program with more information about LADWP (e.g., type of jobs, what is water and what is power, where do you see yourself), especially at the individual-level or in small groups.