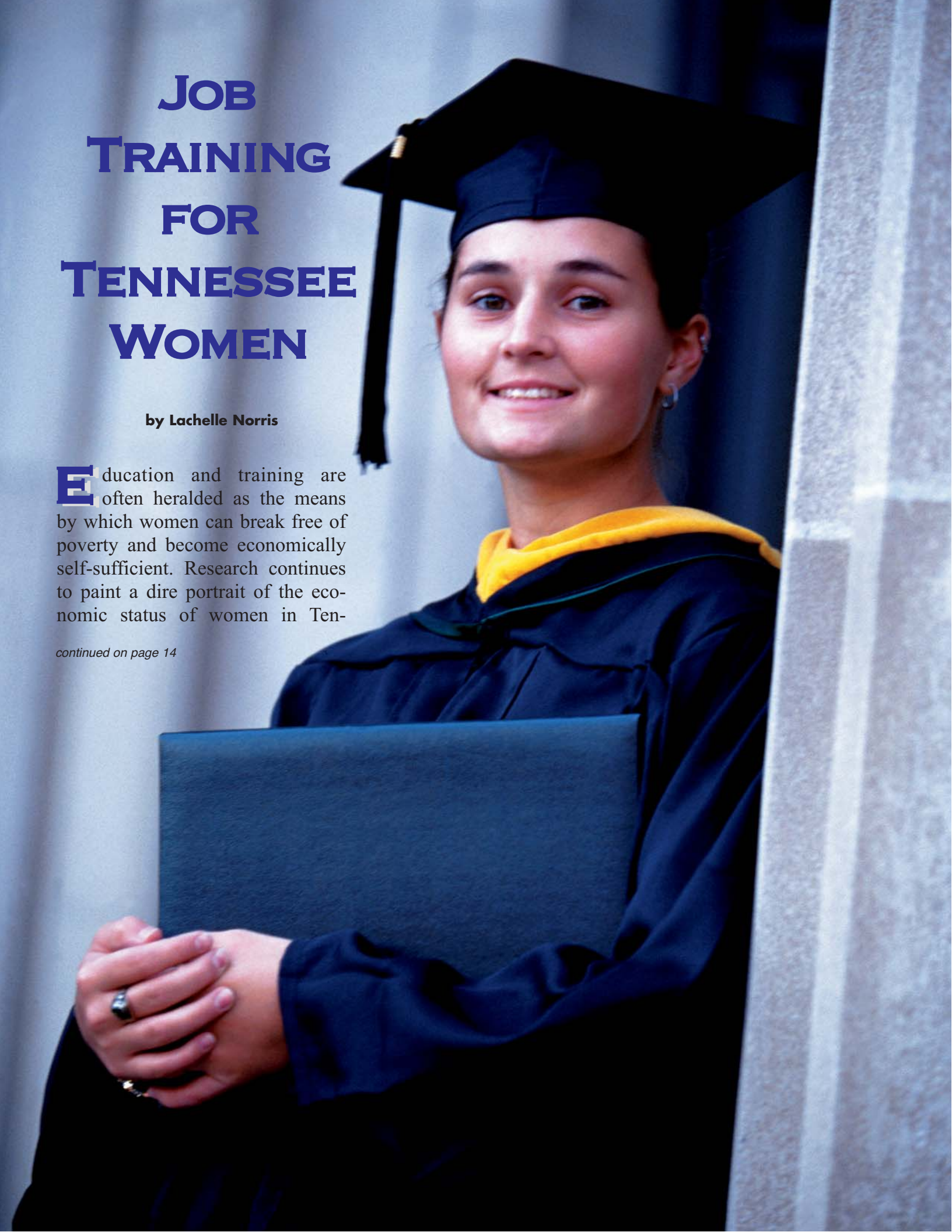


JOB TRAINING FOR TENNESSEE WOMEN

by Lachelle Norris

Education and training are often heralded as the means by which women can break free of poverty and become economically self-sufficient. Research continues to paint a dire portrait of the economic status of women in Ten-

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nessee, indicating that women in this state lag behind their sisters across the United States in regard to earnings and income and numerous other important economic indicators. Recognizing this, enabling legislation mandated that the Tennessee Economic Council on Women (TECW) “evaluate and quantify the results of job training programs that currently exist, and evaluate whether they are helping women to obtain better employment.”¹

To meet this objective, the TECW created a Job Training Task Force in 2001 to examine the various job training and educational programs across the state. The task force researched the opportunities and experiences of women seeking training and education and presented recommendations based on the findings. These recommendations were well received, so much

so that the TECW opted to reinvigorate the task force in 2003. This diverse group of TECW members and staffers and individuals from across the state continued to analyze job training and educational programs. In February 2005, the task force presented a report of its work to Governor Bredesen and the Tennessee legislature. This article summarizes the key findings and recommendations from that report.

Focus of the Work

After much discussion, the task force decided to focus on three basic areas: (1) Tennessee Career Centers, (2) the Families First approach to training and education, and (3) high-demand occupations that provide self-sufficient wages in Tennessee. In addition, TECW research analysts determined that many high-demand/well-paying jobs were those considered nontraditional jobs for women.² The task force reiterated that women seeking to be economically self-sufficient require education and training, and while there are opportunities for training in Tennessee, barriers such as lack of information, lack of funding, availability/location of providers, childcare, and transportation may present problems for those seeking to enhance or develop skills.

An Examination of Tennessee’s Career Centers

Individuals seeking information regarding employment and/or training are likely to visit a Career Center. Based on feedback from center personnel, women appear to be using the centers in greater numbers than men, particularly in those regions where plant closings and relocations have taken place. Job placement is the primary objective of center staff unless an individual faces barriers such as lack of skills/education that prevent this objective from being realized. For clients seeking training, center counselors might assist in researching training and education options. These options may be hampered, however, by several factors, such as (1) center facility needs and communication issues, (2) needs of the clients, especially childcare and transportation costs, (3) lack of information about high-demand/high-wage occupations, and (4) the unfavorable economic conditions in certain regions of the state.

First, Career Centers contacted for this study appeared to be very effective in meeting mandated objectives. Facility needs varied widely and included such items as buildings in need of repair, updates or rehabilitation for individuals with disabilities, timely computer updates, overall funding and staffing shortages, and troublesome communication problems. The TECW task force recommends surveying center staffers reg-

ularly in order to assess and address these needs. The task force also recommends developing an improved communication system for center directors and personnel whereby announcements of regulation changes, grant opportunities, and best practices might take place in a timely and efficient manner. This would also foster the exchange of ideas and information among the numerous centers and affiliates around the state. The task force suggests possible managed list serves, message boards, or online forums as ways to achieve this purpose.

The task force also recommends that individuals and agencies responsible for counseling and training women strive to inform women of high-demand, high-wage occupations and effective means of acquiring such jobs. Women should also be made aware that training for a high-demand, high-wage nontraditional occupation is a feasible means of achieving economic self-sufficiency. At this time there are few, if any, resources designed specifically for women available at Tennessee's Career Centers. Given the importance of education and training in enabling women to become economically self-sufficient, the task force strongly urges increased efforts at targeting, informing, educating, and enabling women regarding their training and education options. An informational brochure (TECW's *Job Training Resource Guide for Tennessee Women*) has been created to assist in this endeavor. Additional materials should be developed.

Client barriers such as reliable transportation, lengthy commutes, increased fuel prices, reliable 24-hour childcare, and lack of training providers in remote areas continue to pose problems for women seeking training and education, particularly in rural areas of the state. The task force therefore recommends a review of the locations of Career Centers and affiliates. In addition, an evaluation of the location of available, certified training providers, particularly those providing training in high-demand occupations, should be reexamined. Are there waiting lists for classes offering training for these occupations? How can more slots for training be made available for those seeking this option?

Tough economic conditions and lack of viable employment options continue to plague individuals seeking jobs that pay a living wage in some regions of the state. Jobs providing a self-sufficient wage are simply not readily available in some areas. Ongoing economic development efforts will be necessary to encourage job growth. In addition, the TECW is currently examining ways in which women are capitalizing on micro loan and grant opportunities designed to encourage entrepreneurial endeavors. In either case, further investment in

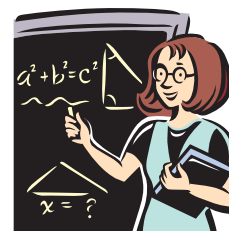
education and training is believed to be critical in fulfilling these objectives.

Human Services, Families First, and Training Opportunities for Tennessee Women

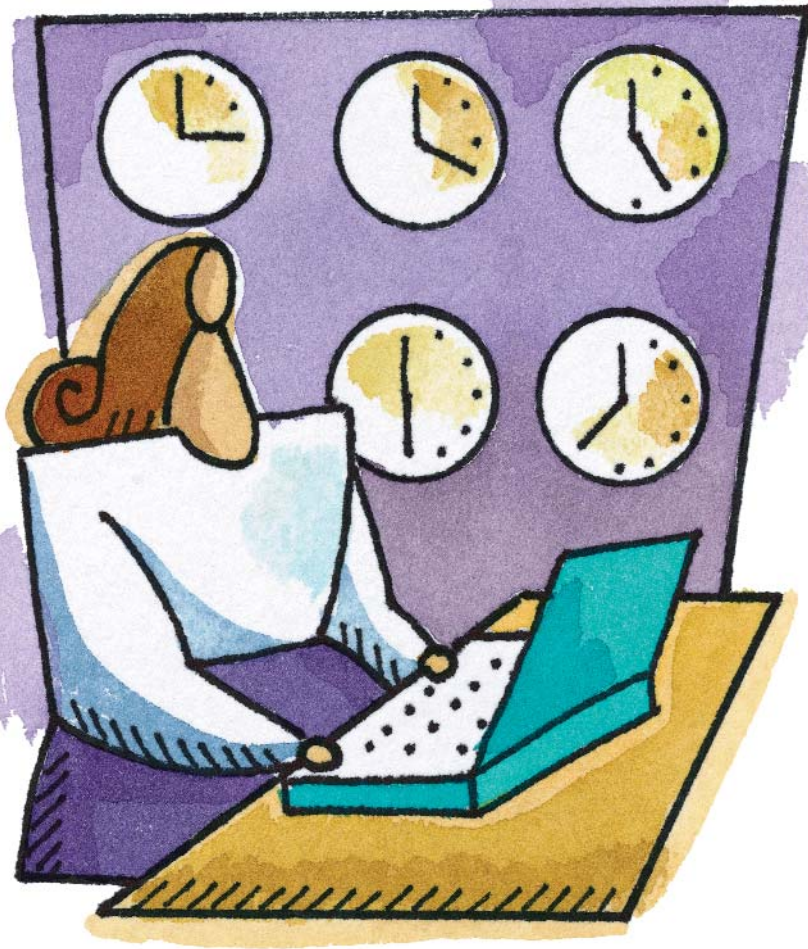
Notable studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Families First approach to training and education. After the first two years of implementation, the overwhelming majority of job placements for Families First participants were in service occupations (44.10 percent) and clerical and sales occupations (27.97 percent); the average wage was determined to be \$5.67/hour ("Families First: Creating Opportunities for Families"). In 1997, a working Families First participant did not make wages sufficient to rise to the level of self-sufficiency, working primarily in "secondary labor market jobs, defined ... as low pay, few benefits, high turnover, and little or no possibility for additional training or advancement" (Rector and Hicks, 2003, p. 49). Review of research published in 1999 (Cope et al., 2001) found Families First participants averaging \$5.83/hour for a 34.6-hour week. Recommendations at that time suggested a need for additional education and job readiness activities. There appears to be little change since that time, and indeed the situation may be worsening. As of June 2004, the average monthly earnings of employed Families First participants are \$651.72, with an additional \$169.39 in cash benefits awarded to families by the state.³ This calculates to \$5.13/hour based on a 40-hour week.

While numerous studies have arrived at differing conclusions, a study of former welfare recipients conducted by the University of Tennessee College of Social Work's Office of Research and Public Service (May 2003) found that "one half of those who leave Families First continue to fall below the federal poverty level" (p. 50). It was also determined that many "leavers," as the study calls them, "faced economic hardship" and "food deprivation" and were forced to seek "assistance to provide for their families" (pg. 50). In this study, 65.3 percent of former welfare recipients were currently employed. Lack of childcare continued to be a major barrier.

A national study released in 2001 (Hayot) found that women leaving welfare may not be aware of or encouraged to consider training or employment in nontraditional occupations. These jobs pay substantially more than traditional service-sector jobs typically viewed as options for women. They tend to provide better benefits and are more likely to be unionized.



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... Increased educational opportunities ... may be the key in enabling women to become economically self-sufficient....

Recommendations from the Hayot study include calls for increasing training opportunities in non-traditional fields, extending training time for women lacking basic skills, and making more information available for women and girls on careers in nontraditional fields. The chance of women achieving economic self-sufficiency could increase as a result, particularly for those leaving the welfare system, according to this study.

In Tennessee, approaches to training of Families First participants differ from training for other individuals such as displaced workers who fall under the auspices of the Workforce Investment Act.⁴ There are separate performance measures for Families First; the program is geared toward low-income individuals, with an emphasis on providing core services and alleviating barriers until training and employment are possible. Often the time needed to overcome such barriers is too great, and some individuals may need much preparation before entering a training program. Some Families First clients may have trouble accessing slots for training. Displaced workers are assisted in finding employment unless barriers prevent such assistance. In both instances, the emphasis lies in job

placement. Funds for postsecondary education are no longer available, and individuals choosing this route are urged to apply for existing grants. According to the director of Family Assistance, Department of Human Services, increased educational opportunities, however, may be the key in enabling women to become economically self-sufficient, but more data are needed. The director stressed that, regardless, women need to be made aware of the long-term benefits of education.

Women Need Training in High-Demand and Nontraditional Jobs

The jobs that are in highest demand vary by region throughout Tennessee due to the industry and employee composition of the area. Research analysts for the TECW task force examined high-demand jobs and self-sufficiency standards in each Local Workforce Investment Area (LWIA) in the state and found that women currently hold 39.6 percent of all high-demand jobs.⁵ In every LWIA, women's average hourly wages are below the self-sufficiency wage requirements. High-demand jobs were found to include both traditional and nontraditional jobs. However, in each LWIA, the average wages of high-demand traditional jobs are lower than the average wages of high-demand nontraditional jobs.⁶ In Tennessee, on average, traditional jobs pay \$1.02 less in hourly wages than nontraditional jobs in the state. Therefore, the task force has concluded that women in Tennessee should consider nontraditional occupations when pursuing job training in high-demand fields.

In Tennessee, certain nontraditional occupational fields containing high-demand jobs with very good or excellent outlooks provide average wages considerably higher than traditional high-demand jobs in the same occupational grouping. Yet many women are not aware of their options when it comes to considering high-demand nontraditional careers. Women may not know such jobs exist, what they entail, what training is required, or what wages such jobs typically pay. Again, the task force has called for wide-scale distribution of the TECW *Job Training Resource Guide for Tennessee Women* and development of additional resource materials and manuals. Job training and career counselors and providers should encourage women to enter training programs in nontraditional jobs that provide a self-sufficient wage and are in high demand.

"It Wouldn't Be Nontraditional If More Women Were Doing It"

The TECW sought to raise awareness about nontraditional jobs by organizing a job training session at the Tennessee Economic Summit for Women on December 3, 2004. During that ses-

sion, women holding nontraditional jobs spoke of the challenges and rewards of being a woman in a nontraditional field. The panel consisted of moderator Delores Crockett (regional administrator, U.S. Department of Labor/Women's Bureau) and speakers Melody Crockett (manager, Product Life-Cycle-Supply Chain Management Implementation at Visteon Glass Operations) and R. Lynn Taylor (residential designer, Taylor Made Plans). This writer reviewed the work being done on this topic by the Tennessee Economic Council on Women.

The panel presentations and closing remarks reiterated the importance of urging women toward nontraditional occupations. Panelists stressed there is a "win/win" situation when women are present in the workforce, particularly in nontraditional fields. The common sentiment expressed was that when women are present companies will profit. Speakers were also adamant that women should become more aware of occupations in nontraditional fields and that educational systems should make strides to inform women about opportunities in these fields. For women frightened of these occupations due to the math and science requirements, the panel advised that "if you just don't like math and science, get over it!" Women are more than capable of success in nontraditional occupations.

In addition to organizing an interest group, suggestions for future work included production of a how-to manual for women seeking information and guidance regarding nontraditional occupations. Support and information systems for women seeking nontraditional job training and career development through post-secondary higher education institutions like the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) could be developed. An online mentoring program based on the GEM-SET model could be implemented with the assistance of the U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau. This would allow women in nontraditional careers around the nation to mentor women from around the state. The session panelists were optimistic that more ideas would emerge with increased mobilization of individuals passionate about enabling Tennessee women in their endeavor to become self-sufficient.

Next Steps?

The TECW's Job Training Task Force recognizes that there is still much work to be done in making Tennessee women economically self-sufficient. There is a need to approach women and girls early in their education to raise awareness of nontraditional occupations and change stereotypes and perceptions about what jobs are appropriate for women. The task force is

excited about the level of interest in developing a broad-based, statewide "Women in Nontraditional Occupations" interest group, conceived of and initiated at the summit, and there is hope of organizing a Nontraditional Occupations Conference for Women in the future.

We need to know more. Continued research on the experiences of, barriers to, and needs of women working in nontraditional occupations is necessary in order to better advise and prepare women entering these fields. We can learn much from other training approaches and models in use around the nation. These programs should be reviewed and incorporated as efforts are made to enhance Tennessee programs. Best practices in other locations involve public/private partnerships and other collaborative programs; these should also be evaluated when considering the most effective programs for Tennessee women. As always, Tennessee women having first-hand knowledge and experience as clients of the system need to be closely involved with any attempt to develop or enhance additional policy and programs. ■

Lachelle Norris is an assistant professor of sociology at Tennessee Technological University. The complete report and supporting data on the status of job training for Tennessee women are available from the Tennessee Economic Council for Women or at www.tennesseewomen.org.

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Notes

1. TCA § 4-5-102.
2. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a non-traditional occupation is considered one in which women constitute 25 percent or less of the workforce.
3. According to the Department of Human Services Web site.
4. Information from interview with Tennessee Department of Human Services Director of Family Assistance.
5. Data can be found in the appendix of the "Status of Job Training for Tennessee Women" report.
6. The LWIA grouping with the most substantial and striking difference between nontraditional and traditional high-demand job average wages is LWIA 8.



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