

Best Practices for Youth Employment Programs: A Synthesis of Current Research

WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN – RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SERIES

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The Problem

“Nationwide, 15 million people between the ages of 16 and 24 are not prepared for high-wage employment. Inadequate education or training is a major reason” [1]. Individuals ill prepared for employment are more likely to live in poverty. Recent statistics indicate that the mean annual earnings of young people with a bachelor’s or advanced degree was \$24,797 in 2007, three times higher than the mean earnings for high school dropouts [2]. Unemployment also impacts communities. Unemployed individuals are unable to contribute to public taxes, lowering a community’s tax base. In addition, taxpayers incur higher spending to cover the social costs of welfare, healthcare, and incarceration [2]. Clearly, communities also benefit when its young people are prepared to become productive adults.

A Brief Note on Language

When discussing youth employment programs, the term “youth” refers to individuals between the ages of 16 to 24.

It’s significant to note that minority low-income youth have the most challenging time finding employment and typically experience the lowest employment rates [3]. Thus, the above statistics disproportionately represent minority and low-income youth.

In response to this societal problem, youth employment programs have been developed to help prepare young people for the demands of the workforce. This *Research to Practice* review outlines the current effective programmatic practices used in youth employment programs. The presented information is drawn from several longer review articles published over the past 15 years, as well as the National Youth Employment Coalition’s workbook on effective practices. In addition, the information draws from three successful national youth employment program models: Jobs for America’s Graduates, YouthBuild, and Job Corps.

The Challenge

It is challenging to identify “best practices” of youth employment programs because practices vary depending on the target population [4,5]. The majority of youth employment programs focus on low-income youth. Many programs further distinguish their target population based on level of education (i.e. high school dropout vs. current high school students), race/ethnicity, gender, criminal history, etc.

In addition, program goals differ based on the target population. While all programs share the broad goal of improving the employability of young people, some focus more heavily on academic achievement whereas others focus on vocational training [5]. For example, if a youth employment program targets high school dropouts, then enhancing basic academic skills and adequately preparing participants for the GED will be a critical program goal. However, if the youth employment program targets at-risk youth currently enrolled in high school, the emphasis may be on career planning and preparation. *The key is to ensure the program goals are appropriately aligned with the needs of the target population.*

Finally, the setting of the employment program is also dependent on the young people it serves. Programs can be community-based, school-based or residential. Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG) is school-based because it serves young people currently enrolled in high school who are at-risk for dropping out. The location is aligned with the target population. Conversely, the YouthBuild program focuses on high-school dropouts and therefore it is community-based, allowing young people to rebuild their community and learn vocational skills.

These characteristics diversify youth employment programs and, because of the wide variety, it is difficult to identify best practices [4]. In other words, no silver bullet exists. Effective practices vary based on the target population and program goals. This key point is critical to remember while reviewing the presented information.

Effective Programmatic Practices

In spite of the aforementioned challenge, certain program features stand out as consistently present in successful youth programs. Effective programs, regardless of the youth they serve, have some or all of the following ten characteristics. These characteristics are broken down into four categories: program design and content, program relevance, program delivery and program assessment and quality assurance

Program Design and Content

Effective Practice #1: Have a Clear Mission and Goals

This first practice directly relates to the previously stated challenge: in order for a program to be effective, it must have a clearly defined purpose or mission. This includes a clear definition of which youth the program serves, the outcomes it wants young people to achieve and the strategies it will use to attain these outcomes [6,7]. While many different approaches work for young people, the key to effectiveness is ensuring there is coherence in the programs’ purpose and activities.

Effective Practice #2: Focus on Employability Skills

A youth employment program should have a clear focus on helping young people develop employability skills. While this may seem obvious, a clear definition and framework of “employability skills” is relatively elusive. The critical question is: What specifically should programs be teaching young people to ensure they are prepared for the workforce?

Two sources, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) and Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG), provide useful frameworks for answering the above question. In 1990, the Secretary of Labor appointed a commission (SCANS) to determine the skills young people need to succeed in the workplace. The commission identified a three-part foundation of skills and personal qualities needed for solid job performance. This foundation provides a general framework of employability skills (see Table 1). The main limitation of this framework is that it is fairly broad and nonspecific.

Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) provides a more specific list of core competencies needed for employment. The framework lists 37 specific competencies broken down into six categories: career development, job attainment, job survival, basic skills, leadership and self-development, and personal skills [9]. JAG works to ensure each of its participants acquire these specific competencies (see Table 2).

While neither of these lists is exhaustive, they both provide a basic framework for the types of skills youth employment programs should be teaching. Again, the most effective instruction of these skills will vary based on the needs of the young people in a program. These skills may be taught through direct instruction in a classroom or experientially through work and/or classroom activities

Effective Practice #3: Provide Comprehensive Services
Effective programs are increasingly taking a more holistic approach to workforce development, concentrating on the multiple skills and competencies needed to succeed in the workforce [7]. Youth employment services may include: vocational training, academic instruction, counseling, career exploration and guidance, mentoring, health and dental care, childcare, community service experience, job readiness workshops, work experience and internships [7,9,10,11]. The most effective programs offer some combination of the above activities, depending on the needs of their target population. Programs may also provide additional services not mentioned in the previous list.

Job Corps, the nation's largest vocationally focused education and training program, is an example of a model program that takes a holistic approach to working with young people. Job Corps is residential-based program that focuses on economically disadvantaged youth in need of additional education. Nationwide, there are 110 Job Corps centers that house and train young people [11]. Participants receive intensive vocational training and academic instruction, at an individual pace. The amount of time a young person resides in the center varies, but on average, participants spend about eight months receiving intensive services. Job Corps is unique in its comprehensive approach. Rather than focusing solely on vocational training, the program provides a range of additional services including counseling, social skills training, and health education [11]. Young people also receive meals, health and dental care, and can participate in student government and recreational activities [11].

Table 1

SCAN'S THREE-PART FOUNDATION

Basic Skills: **Reads, writes, performs arithmetic and mathematical operations, listens and speaks**

- A. *Reading* — locates, understands, and interprets written information in prose and in documents such as manuals, graphs, and schedules
- B. *Writing* — communicates thoughts, ideas, information, and messages in writing; and creates documents such as letters, directions, manuals, reports, graphs, and flow charts
- C. *Arithmetic/Mathematics* — performs basic computations and approaches practical problems by choosing appropriately from a variety of mathematical techniques
- D. *Listening* — receives, attends to, interprets, and responds to verbal messages and other cues
- E. *Speaking* — organizes ideas and communicates orally

Thinking Skills: **Thinks creatively, makes decisions, solves problems, visualizes, knows how to learn, and reasons**

- A. *Creative Thinking* — generates new ideas
- B. *Decision Making* — specifies goals and constraints, generates alternatives, considers risks, and evaluates and chooses best alternative
- C. *Problem Solving* — recognizes problems and devises and implements plan of action
- D. *Seeing Things in the Mind's Eye* — organizes, and processes symbols, pictures, graphs, objects, and other information
- E. *Knowing How to Learn* — uses efficient learning techniques to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills
- F. *Reasoning* — discovers a rule or principle underlying the relationship between two or more objects and applies it when solving a problem

Personal Qualities: **Displays responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, and integrity and honesty**

- A. *Responsibility* — exerts a high level of effort and perseveres towards goal attainment
- B. *Self-Esteem* — believes in own self-worth and maintains a positive view of self
- C. *Sociability* — demonstrates understanding, friendliness, adaptability, empathy, and politeness in group settings
- D. *Self-Management* — assesses self accurately, sets personal goals, monitors progress, and exhibits self-control
- E. *Integrity/Honesty* — chooses ethical courses of action

Source:

U.S. Department of Labor. (1991). What work requires of schools: A SCANS report for America 2000. Retrieved November 21, 2009 from, <http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS/whatwork>

Table 2

JOBS FOR AMERICA'S GRADUATES (JAG)
CORE COMPETENCIES

A. CAREER DEVELOPMENT COMPETENCIES

- A.1 Identify occupational interests, aptitudes and abilities.
- A.2 Relate interests, aptitudes and abilities to appropriate occupations
- A.3 Identify desired life style and relate to selected occupations
- A.4 Develop a career path for a selected occupation.
- A.5 Select an immediate job goal.
- A.6 Describe the conditions and specifications of the job goal.

B. JOB ATTAINMENT COMPETENCIES

- B.7 Construct a resume.
- B.8 Conduct a job search.
- B.9 Develop a letter of application.
- B.10 Use the telephone to arrange an interview.
- B.11 Complete application forms.
- B.12 Complete employment tests.
- B.13 Complete a job interview.

C. JOB SURVIVAL COMPETENCIES

- C.14 Demonstrate appropriate appearance.
- C.15 Identify expectations that employers have of employees.
- C.16 Identify problems of new employees
- C.17 Demonstrate time management.
- C.18 Follow directions.
- C.19 Practice effective human relations.
- C.20 Appropriately resign from a job.

D. BASIC SKILLS COMPETENCIES

- D.21 Comprehend verbal communication
- D.22 Comprehend written communications occupations.
- D.23 Communicate in writing
- D.24 Communication verbally
- D.25 Perform mathematical calculations

E. LEADERSHIP AND SELF DEVELOPMENT

- E.26 Demonstrate team membership.
- E.27 Demonstrate team leadership
- E.28 Deliver presentations to a group
- E.29 Compete successfully with peers.
- E.30 Demonstrate commitment to an organization

F. PERSONAL SKILLS COMPETENCIES

- F.31 Explain the types of maturity.
- F.32 Identify a self-value system and how it affects life
- F.33 Base decisions on values and goals
- F.34 Identify process of decision-making.
- F.35 Demonstrate ability to assume responsibility for actions and decisions.
- F.36 Demonstrate a positive attitude.
- F.37 Develop healthy self-concept for home, school and work.

Source:

Jobs for America's Graduates. (2009). JAG Model. Retrieved November 21, 2009 from http://www.jag.org/model_competencies.htm

This program is costly to run because of the multiple services its residents receive, but research demonstrates it positively impacts the educational attainment of its participants [11].

Program Relevance

Effective Practice #4: Use Positive Youth Development Principles

It is evident that effective youth employment programs are based on positive youth development (PYD) principles. Broadly defined, PYD is a unifying philosophy characterized by a positive asset-building orientation that builds on youth strengths rather than categorizing them by their deficits [12]. Three basic tenets are apparent in a PYD approach: 1) youth are resources to be nurtured; 2) youth must be considered co-producers or full partners in their environment; and 3) the approach focuses on relationships and processes. See Table 3 for best practices aligned with these basic PYD tenets.

YouthBuild is a model program that exemplifies positive youth development principles. The program focuses on low-income, out-of-school and out-of-work youth. YouthBuild participants learn job skills by building affordable housing for low-income people, while also engaging in academic instruction to help them earn their GED or high school diploma [10]. The YouthBuild model focuses on five key components: education, construction, leadership development, counseling and graduate services [10]. In order to promote leadership, youth are involved in the decision-making processes of the organization. Five young people serve on the national YouthBuild board of directors, along with ten adult board members [13]. Young people also engage in policy decisions at the local level, making decisions about future projects and activities. In addition to allowing youth to be partners in decision-making and organizational leaders, YouthBuild fosters strong youth-adult relationships and creates a long-term mini-community in which young

people make new friends committed to a positive lifestyle.

Table 3

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Encourage Strong Youth/Adult Relationships

Research continuously recognizes that sustained relationships with caring, knowledgeable adults are important for the healthy development of young people [4,7]. Caring adults are critical for gaining a young person's trust and commitment to a program. Such adults may be mentors, teachers, counselors, program directors, employers or community members.

Build Youths' Responsibility and Leadership Skills

Effective initiatives acknowledge that youth are capable of actively contributing to their environment and should be involved in decision-making processes [6]. The rationale for this is simple: when youth are involved in decision-making processes, they can become resources for creating the kinds of settings that promote positive development for themselves and others.

Create Opportunities that are Age/Stage Appropriate

Effective youth programs acknowledge the distinct needs of young people and create opportunities that are age and stage appropriate. For example, less mature youth may not be ready for a job and may benefit from in-program activities, but older youth may be ready to take on an outside internship or work experience [7].

Build a Sense of Self and Group

Effective initiatives help young people develop a positive image of who they are. In order to do this, programs may work to increase young people's life skills, provide youth with opportunities to showcase their work and skills, use journals, and engage in self-reflection [7]. In addition to helping participants develop their personal identity, youth need to form attachments to larger groups [7]. Peer groups and peer support increase youth's attachment to a program or organization.

Program Delivery

Effective Programmatic Practice #5: Recruit Quality Staff

The success of a program is integrally connected to the quality of the staff. Staff members need to have a strong knowledge base and ability to perform the technical skills they are teaching young people [6]. In youth employment programs, staff members who have strong connections to potential employers are particularly valuable. Local businesses and public sector employers not only provide job opportunities, but may also help an organization develop curriculum, allow them to borrow equipment, and serve as speakers [7].

An organization also needs to be able to develop and retain talented workers. Staff members need opportunities to engage in professional development, collaborate with other employees and professionals, and have access to needed resources [6,7].

Effective Practice #6: Provide Follow-Up Services

Effective programs have an extended follow-up period, typically lasting at least one year after completion of the program [7]. For example, the Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) program provides one year of follow-up services after participants complete their GED. Follow-up services include: placement in an entry-level job that leads to a career opportunity or guidance in pursuing a postsecondary education [9]. Other programs create longer-term follow-up services. For example, YouthBuild created an alumni network (YouthBuild Alumni Association) that allows alum to stay involved and continue to participate for years.

Effective Practice #7: Intervene Early

Evaluation studies have indicated that the earlier a program reaches young people, the more effective the intervention. While most national programs focus on young people ages 16 to 24, Jobs for America's Graduates recognizes the importance of early intervention and begins programming in some schools as early as middle school. Studies also indicate that for youth who have been in trouble or displayed problem behaviors, programs that reach youth quickly are more effective than those that reach youth after some delay [5,14]. Thus, early intervention is related to more successful outcomes.

Effective Practice #8: Provide Financial Incentives

Successful youth employment programs usually offer financial incentives for young people [4]. Effective programs emphasize that your success or failure will have financial consequences [14]. Financial incentives may differ. Examples of incentives include: payments, allowances, welfare reductions and/or contributions to college funds. However, financial incentives appear to work better for in-school youth than dropouts, particularly dropouts that have been out of school for a substantial amount of time [4].

Program Assessment and Quality Assurance

Effective Practice #9: Document Competencies Gained

Programs that measure outcomes typically focus on the number of job placements and use this evidence to attest to the effectiveness of their services [1]. However, with the push to incorporate youth development principles, scholars now assert that simply measuring job placement rates is not enough:

“Don’t make the mistake of accepting that effectiveness is achieved by enrolling and graduating the number of young people specified in the funding contract. Truly effective youth employment programs help young people develop their own capacity to manage the responsibilities of adult life, including making a good living for themselves and their families” (1, p.13).

Thus, evaluation of youth employment programs also need to assess a wider range of the potential competencies youth gain.

Effective initiatives document and communicate the competencies gained by young people. Competencies can be general “soft skills” such as communication ability or “hard skills” such as computer repairs [7]. The programs also help youth understand the competencies they have gained and learn how to effectively communicate these competencies to potential employers [7].

There is no standard protocol for how competencies should be measured or documented. However, some international research suggests that programs should have participants create portfolios that include items such as personal writing samples, resumes, cover letters, and feedback from mock interviews, among others [15]. Portfolios are a concrete way to document and communicate competencies gained to both youth and future employers. This data should then be used to ensure the program is accomplishing its goals and outcomes.

Effective Practice #10: Embrace Continuous Improvement

The improvement process is a repetitive cycle that begins by collecting relevant data, analyzing the results and then systematically planning and implementing changes. Effective programs establish systems that allow them to make fact-based decisions in planning, managing and

improving [7]. Organizations may use multiple sources to inform their practice, such as participant portfolios, survey data from young people and/or parents, and employer feedback or reports.

It is also important to remember that many stakeholders can contribute to the improvement efforts of an organization. Youth, staff members, funders, board members, and community members all have a stake in the program and can provide insights into how the program might be improved. Youth serving programs – such as youth employment programs - particularly benefit by incorporating youth in the improvement process. Youth input ensures the program better meets young people’s needs and also serves as a learning opportunity [7]. For example, young people can help develop, administer and analyze youth surveys, or conduct interviews with current and former participants.

Limitations of the Current Knowledge Base

Although the reviewed articles discussed “best” or “effective” practices, there is still little evidence on the short and long-term outcomes associated with youth employment programs [4,14]. The majority of programs focus on documenting the number of young people employed upon completion of the program. However, as previously noted, scholars and practitioners are becoming increasingly aware that youth employment programs do more than just place youth in jobs. Yet, there is still little evidence to demonstrate what additional outcomes or effects youth employment programs have on youth development. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education notes there is still scant evidence about the value of specific program features (i.e. individualized instruction, high-quality internships, occupational training) [4]. Therefore it is unclear if some of the aforementioned effective practices are more critical than others.

Another limitation of the current knowledge base is that much of it is based on evaluations of large federal programs, as opposed to local community initiatives. This is concerning because small community initiatives may face different barriers or utilize different effective practices than large federal programs. The assumption in this paper is that the effective practices are applicable to smaller, community initiatives, but there is no evidence to support or refute this belief.

Lastly, most of the existing literature on youth employment programs focuses on young people ages 16-24. Because research has yet to examine employment programs serving younger youth (such as 13-15 year olds), it is unclear how practices might differ for this population. It is evident that this younger population seeks employment and may benefit from participating in employment programs. Recent estimates found that 57% of 14-year-olds and 64% of 15-year-olds worked in some type of job [16]. The paucity of research in this area is surprising because studies have demonstrated early intervention (i.e. working with younger youth) as an effective practice.

Conclusion

It is evident there is a need for youth employment programs, not only to help youth find meaningful work, but also to help prepare our future workforce. By continuing to fund youth employment programs that utilize effective practices, we can help increase the likelihood that future generations are adequately prepared for high-wage employment.

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