

We Need to Change the Conversation

YOUNG ADULT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REENGAGEMENT PROGRAMMING

DECEMBER 2018

Executive Summary

A Report Prepared with support from the Community Center
for Education Results on behalf of the Road Map Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

This report, funded by the Community Center for Education Results (CCER), synthesizes the results of interviews conducted with 127 Opportunity Youth, 18-29 years of age by Business Government Community Connections (BGCC) for SkillUp Washington. These young adults were interviewed as part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation Generation Work partnership in Seattle, Washington.

2. REPORT METHODS

- ◆ The interview pool included ninety-seven (97) young adults engaged in local education and employment programs and thirty (30) young adults who were interviewed at different venues, including food banks, bus stops and homeless encampments.
- ◆ The ninety-seven (97) young adults enrolled in education and employment programs responded to a set of interview questions using a customized Employment and Resource Assessment tool to garner information about the strategies which influenced young adults' confidence, career outlook, awareness and use of skills, and progress towards achieving their career goals. Young adults also shared information about the instructional and career navigation approaches which they found helpful, as well as areas where they needed more support or resources.
- ◆ Sixty (60) of the 97 young adults also responded to post interviews using the same tool. This report focuses on the story driving their self-assessments of career pathway progress in order to understand from the perspective of young adults where they have received particularly useful or promising supports, or may need other types of assistance from college or training programs.
- ◆ The interview data was entered into a qualitative data base, coded and synthesized. Whenever young people identified areas where they were encountering challenges, they were invited to suggest solutions or recommendations for change.

3. KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ Over half (55%) of the 127 young adults were male and 41% female. Nine (8%) were veterans. Most lived in low income communities in King County, and 65 (51%) were residents of South King County. Sixteen percent were either homeless or vulnerably housed.

- ◆ One quarter dropped out of high school before graduating, often due to family crises, incarceration of a parent, homelessness or their own behavioral problems. Some reported that math and test anxiety were the main reasons they dropped out of school and GED programs. One-fifth had been involved in the criminal justice system. Some of the stories underscore critical transition points in K-12, court, foster, or GED programs when young adults did not receive the type of support they needed to reengage in school or work.
- ◆ After engaging in Generation Work programs almost all young adults experienced gains in self-worth and in overcoming obstacles that might get in the way of their working. Gains were often attributed to class exercises that required them to demonstrate confidence, skills and team building.
- ◆ Most young adults reported increases in feeling positive about how they would do in future job situations. Positive changes were attributed to classroom exercises which portrayed workplace scenarios and prepared them for the types of situations they might encounter when they enter the workforce. They also liked worksite tours, and classroom presentations by employers. Young adults who self-reported lower pre scores and more modest gains were very likely to say that they had been laid off or fired from previous jobs, and often experienced difficulty getting along with supervisors and co-workers.
- ◆ Young adults who report on pre-assessments the following circumstances: a lack of safe housing or affordable housing and a lack of math skills and a lack of support system, were five times more likely to not complete the training and three times more likely to have poor attendance (as defined as missing 20% of the classes) than other students who were not reporting the same combination of challenges.
- ◆ Young adults who said that they lacked a support system were the most likely to identify multiple (5 or more) barriers on the Employment and Resource Assessment, suggesting that college navigators may want to work early on with these students to connect them to a strong network of providers who can offer support and act as a proxy support system.
- ◆ At least 35% of young people had not enrolled for health benefits – even though many reported a need for various types of health care, and most were likely to be eligible.
- ◆ Forty-five (35%) of the young adults reported that access to food was a challenge. Fourteen young adults contributed their food stamps in lieu of money for rent to other household members, in order to ensure that they had a place to live.

- ◆ Forty-one young adults highlighted the importance of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, as well as the significant distinctions between the two. One young adult who was pursuing a trades-related job said: “Employers who say they want to diversify their workforce may hire us, but whether we stay or not will depend on whether we feel included.”
- ◆ Twenty-seven (21%) of the young adults were frustrated that the college and/or workforce systems seemed to offer young adults very few choices for training. There was a general sense among the twenty-seven respondents that by limiting training courses the college and workforce systems were discriminating against low income persons.

4. EXAMPLES OF YOUNG ADULT RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ During classroom presentations related to career exploration, emphasize which companies have the best record of hiring and promoting diverse populations.
- ◆ Collect data to compare the progress of students from different ethnic groups to make changes in staffing, program design, partnerships and policies.
- ◆ Accelerate the education of young adults whenever possible. Many young adults don’t have a lot of time where they can afford to go to school. Help them get credit for prior learning.
- ◆ Make it a priority to provide young adults with opportunities to earn and learn in tandem. Many young people like combining training with work. Also, this provides young adults with job experience and income.
- ◆ Connect young adults to employers for career mentoring and/or employment opportunities which include internships, on-job-training and apprenticeships.
- ◆ Open a career coaching center for young people after they complete training and have formally exited from college or programs. This place-based resource could be open at different times, evenings and weekends. Services would include application assistance and advice about workplace situations that may be occurring in their job.

5. SUMMARY

Young adult feedback underscores the importance of education and workforce development services which include a closely knit web of career navigation, referrals, and industry-driven instruction and employer engagement opportunities. All activities need to integrate diversity and inclusion messaging, materials, beliefs, and partners. We can learn a lot from the previous experiences of young adults and use their feedback to design strategies which end their disconnection from school and fail to kick start their connections to employment, beginning in the K-12 system.

Young adult observations about the current approaches used by college and workforce partners are valuable. Their concerns about limiting career pathway choices are particularly noteworthy. Are we overlooking career pathway areas that could also be high demand because we lack

“When I returned to school from detention it was always hard. I felt a little more disconnected every time (and there were a lot). I also felt that teachers were just expecting me to be gone soon again.”

“My mother works. Does not have time to attend school meetings – she is often on call, working home care jobs, and does not really speak good English. She is not comfortable in schools and does not feel that they like her because she does not volunteer or show up.”

“I think all new kids to schools, whether they are homeless or not need some kind of kid assigned to them who is an ambassador. Maybe this could be a community service requirement.”

“I think if in the carpentry class I took if I had actually had a job or something I might have done better in school, and not quit.”

imagination or fail to invest in strategies that last long enough to make a difference? Are we discriminating against low-income and ethnically diverse students by limiting their career pathway choices? Are we heeding the advice of one young adult to not ask them what they want to be, and instead ask them what they want to do?

Their concerns about the time it takes for training are also important to consider. Are we doing all we can to accelerate their training, save them money and support their health and economic security? Are we reducing duplicate coursework? Promoting credit for prior learning? Offering GED, math or developmental instruction and work opportunities in tandem? Do the workforce development and college systems, as one young adult suggested, “need a reboot?” How can different systems work better together to jointly support young adult career progression? We know that in the economy right now there is not a lack of work, per se; rather, as many point out, there is a mismatch of young adult skills and the hiring needs of employers. The comments and situations of young adults suggest, however, that more than a skills mismatch is at play. The career progression efforts of some young adults are influenced by a lack of resources, confidence, self-efficacy and their own challenges introducing structure into their lives. Against this backdrop do we need to be more deliberate about developing career progression models that intentionally build the self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-regulation skills of young adults into the design of high demand career pathways? Could this become a more nuanced and more deeply supported career navigation approach that is part of a young adult career development system?

Using young adult feedback to design reengagement and career coaching strategies which end their disconnection from school and work is critical as their success correlates with the well-being of the whole community. Listening to what young adults say and need makes sense.

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