preparing youth for the 21st century knowledge economy
Youth Programs and Workforce Preparation

by Graham R. Cochran and Theresa M. Ferrari

In the 21st century, the idea of preparing youth for the work-force has taken on new meaning. The shift to a knowledge economy has brought widespread concern that young people are entering the workforce without the skills employers value most, such as communication, critical thinking, leadership, and teamwork skills (Levy & Murnane, 2006; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003).

Nearly all the attention on remedies for this skills gap has focused on school-based reforms. However, since learning cuts across both the school day and after-school hours (Hall & Gruber, 2007; Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004), youth programs can play an important role in addressing this issue.

Lack of skills is only part of the concern. Another aspect is lack of opportunity (America's Promise, 2007; Joyce & Neumark, 2001). America's Promise (2007) data suggest that young people lack opportunities to practice and master skills outside of school. Though afterschool programs have expanded greatly

in the past decade, most target elementary school children. However, interest is growing in programs that address adolescents' unique needs (Hall & Gruber, 2007; Pittman, Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, & Ferber, 2003; Wynn, 2003). Adolescents are expected to acquire skills that will help them in the transition to

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Both authors are passionate about workforce preparation and the important role youth organizations can play in preparing young people for future success.

college, the workforce, and adulthood (Lippman, Atienza, Rivers, & Keith, 2008) Although youth programs can be a key resource in preparing young people for the world of work, their potential has yet to be realized (Schwarz & Stolow, 2006).

By their very nature, youth programs organized around positive youth development contribute to workforce readiness, whether or not they offer opportunities specifically geared toward workforce preparation. However, from our vantage point as youth development professionals who have led both afterschool and workforce preparation programs, we believe youth programs can make an even greater impact by focusing on the complementary nature of positive youth development and workforce preparation.

Our conception of workforce preparation programs is not limited to preparing young people to get a job or to follow a specific career path. The skills critical for success in the 21st century workforce are the same skills needed to be competent and contributing citizens and family members (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004; Levin, 1994). Youth development programs can intentionally create work-based learning experiences that help young people develop the skills they need to succeed as students, employees, and community members.

As youth programs evaluate how to enhance their opportunities for adolescents, workforce preparation should be part of the discussion. In this paper, we will make the case for a focus on workforce preparation and examine youth programs as a context for workforce development. Of the many ways to blend youth development and workforce preparation, we will focus specifically on work-based learning. We have synthesized principles that can inform youth workforce development, with program examples to illustrate them. Finally, we consider the benefits and challenges of workforce preparation in youth programs and summarize the roles youth programs can take.

The Need for Workforce Preparation

Youth programs can be ideal places to develop skills needed for the 21st century workforce (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Schwarz & Stolow, 2006), yet focus on workforce preparation is not widespread among youth programs. Such a focus could help close both the skills gap and the opportunity gap.

> The nature of work has changed, and addressing the widening gap between the skills employers need and the capabilities of new workers is vital to the future.

Skills for Success in the Knowledge Economy

Today's knowledge and technology-based economy, having simplified or eliminated routine tasks, requires highly skilled workers (Levy & Murnane, 2006; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003). As workplaces have become more complex, more jobs now require critical thinking and social skills. Workers must continuously update their knowledge and skills. As noted by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) Public Policy Council (2003), "the knowledge economy of the 21st century is anchored by two critical commodities: people and knowledge" (p. 6).

For over 20 years, and especially recently, the gap between the skills desired by employers and the skills of people entering the workforce has been the subject of research publications (Business-Higher Education Forum, 2003; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003), opinion polls (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007; Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2005) and the popular press (Wallis & Steptoe, 2006). Employers and business leaders, educators, government task forces, and other key stakeholders have consistently identified a skills gap in graduates of high school and of two-year and four-year colleges. All agree: The nature of work has changed, and addressing the widening gap between the skills employers need and the capabilities of new workers is vital to the future.

Cochran and Lekies (2008) synthesized the current literature to create a framework of skills needed for success in the 21st century. Their six categories are listed in the box on the next page. Though basic skills—reading, writing, and math—and job-specific skills are also necessary, the skills employers most frequently cited as important are these applied "soft" skills (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006).

Understanding Adolescent Employment

Most work for adolescents occurs naturally; working youth are in the workforce, rather than in youth programs. Much has been written about adolescent employment, including its nature and extent—who works, at what kind of jobs, for how long—and its benefits and consequences (see Stone & Mortimer, 1998, and

Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006, for recent reviews). Young people begin to work as early as age 12 in informal jobs such as babysitting or yard work (Huang, Pergamit, & Shkolnik, 2001). The likelihood of employment increases with age: In one survey, over half of adolescents held a job at least part of the time while they were 14; nearly two-thirds were working at age 15 (Rothstein, 2001). Most young people have worked at some point by the time they are seniors in high school (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000).

The literature suggests that adolescent work experiences have both detrimental and beneficial aspects. The primary arguments against adolescent employment are that it competes with and detracts from school performance in a kind of zero-sum model (Post & Pong, 2000; Warren, 2002) and that young people who work experience negative educational, social, and psychological outcomes. Most of this research demonstrates that intense employment (over 20 hours per week) is associated with negative outcomes such as dropping out of school (McNeal, 1997) and substance use (Marsh & Kleitman, 2005). However, the results are mixed; though some researchers have documented these negative outcomes, others have not. Also, the limitations of cross-sectional data mean that researchers cannot sort out the direction

of causality: Is working longer hours the cause of negative outcomes for adolescents, or is work intensity a consequence of existing negative conditions? Does working more hours "pull" students out of school, or are poorly performing students "pushed" into working more hours? Other studies provide some clues. For example, when pre-existing differences are controlled, the intensity of adolescent employment may not adversely affect grades (Schoenhals, Tienda, & Schneider, 1998). Regarding the zero-sum model, research has shown that work did not appreciably decrease the time spent on homework but did decrease the time spent watching TV and hanging out (Schoenhals et al., 1998; Warren, 2002).

Other researchers propose that work has the potential to provide adolescents with developmental opportunities. A fundamental benefit is that young people develop an understanding of how the work world operates (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Whalen, DeCoursey, & Skyles, 2003). In the workplace, youth are presented with real-world opportunities to develop such qualities as responsibility and independence (Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Stone & Mortimer, 1998). They also develop social capital; that is, they create informal networks and interact with adult role models who encourage good work habits (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2000; Whalen et al., 2003). Their job experiences enable them to develop valuable skills (Leventhal, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Whalen et al., 2003). Skills learned on the job may have an academic benefit, at least indirectly, by encouraging interest in school (Stern, McMillion, Hopkins, & Stone, 1990). Adolescents' work experiences can lead to self-discovery and goal setting, as well as increased feelings of autonomy and independence (Brown, 2001; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004; Whalen et al., 2003). These benefits would likely carry over into other aspects of their lives.

A third perspective is that working during adolescence is neither all good nor all bad (Stone & Mortimer, 1998). Jobs are not created equal, and adolescents do not all experience work in the same way. Individual and community differences influence adolescents' experiences: the reasons young people enter the workforce, their working conditions, the kind of work they do, and what they gain from it. The potential for adolescent employment to be a positive experience depends on the quality of the work environment (Entwisle et al., 2000; Mortimer, 2003; Warren, 2002) and the degree of connection between work and other contexts (Hansen & Jarvis, 2000). For example, adolescent employees generally benefit from jobs in which the boss treats employ-

ees respectfully and allows them to arrange their work schedule around their school schedule. Working is more likely to be a negative experience if young people work in unsafe conditions, do not receive adequate training, have negative interactions with co-workers or supervisors, or work in an environment that condones unethical practices. If parents discuss work with their children, they can help to ensure that adolescents are developing positive attitudes and dispositions toward employment (Bryant, Zvonkovis, Raskauskas, & Peters, 2004).

Mortimer's (2003) long-term study of adolescent employment found work to be a positive experience when young people have jobs that meet certain conditions: manageable levels of responsibility, autonomy, and stress; opportunities to learn new things and use their skills; and reasonable pay. However, these conditions do not always characterize youth employment (Bryant et al., 2004). A recent note from one of our colleagues confirms this situation (N. Arnett, personal communication, January 29, 2009). He noted that the world of work can be a "scary place" for teens, especially in poorer communities:

> Teens repeatedly tell us that…[there is] the very real threat of frequent robberies, typically armed, and co-workers who steal and place the blame on others. Teens decide that getting killed over an $8/hour job at the local fast food restaurant does not provide enough benefit for the risk involved. Teens tell us that supervisors in most situations are not interested in their individual development….[Furthermore], many employers who used to hire teens are moving out of these communities….Even self-employed opportunities like lawn mowing, leaf raking, and snow shoveling have significant risks when you are out and accessible and you always have to worry about someone trying to rob you.

For adolescent employment to be a stepping stone to future workplace success, employers should emphasize factors that contribute to a positive work experience and minimize those that create negative conditions. Part of the answer to providing better work experiences is for youth programs to facilitate workforce preparation.

The Case for Workforce Preparation in Youth Programs

A definition of *workforce preparation* that presumes a continuum of developmental experiences provides the basis for our argument that youth programs are ideally suited to serve as contexts for workforce preparation, which can dovetail with a philosophy of positive youth development.

Workforce Preparation as Process

Workforce preparation is not a one-time event. It is a process consisting of a variety of experiences that introduce young people to the world of work (DeCoursey & Skyles, 2007; Ferrari, 2003). Such a range of program offerings can help young people to identify their interests and explore career opportunities; to develop work readiness skills such how to dress and act on the job, complete applications, and interview; to acquire skills needed in the knowledge economy; and to gain actual work experience. As DeCoursey and Skyles (2007) describe it:

> This continuum does not begin with immediate involvement with employers. Rather, youth are encouraged to explore their interests with educators and program providers while learning about the behavioral expectations of the workplace. Only when youth have achieved greater knowledge of and practice in meeting workplace expectations coupled with an understanding of their own interests and identity are they connected to employers. (p. 47)

Workforce preparation should provide not only abstract knowledge about work, but also active learning experiences that put young people in contact with adults in the workplace. These should not be one-shot activities, but part of a continuum of experiences that increase in complexity and challenge in developmentally appropriate ways.

Youth Programs as Positive Developmental Settings

A growing body of research points to the ability of youth programs to serve as positive developmental settings. A variety of studies show that youth obtain developmental benefits from consistent participation in well-run quality youth programs (e.g., Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008; Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002; Vandell et al., 2006). Through such programs, youth are able to meet needs for belonging, connection, independence, and mastery (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). They learn valuable skills such as teamwork and problem solving, develop social competence, and connect with adult role models (Hansen & Larson, 2007; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). Youth development professionals have long referred to these and other similar skills as *life skills*, but they are also the skills employers value.

Youth desire new and challenging activities, as well

as opportunities to take leadership, hold meaningful roles, and carry out real responsibilities (Chaskin & Baker, 2006; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Pearce & Larson, 2006). Researchers concur that these opportunities are critical to the development of both identity (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kroger, 2000; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006) and initiative (Larson, 2000; Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005). Although there is no magic formula, research suggests that, to derive the benefits of participating in such programs, youth must participate with sufficient frequency, over a long enough period of time, and in a variety of activities (Metz, Goldsmith, & Arbreton, 2008; Vandell, Shernoff, Pierce, Bolt, Dadisman, & Brown, 2005; Vandell et al., 2006). In contrast to school, youth programs are characterized by voluntary participation, so that youth experience higher levels of motivation and interest (Larson, 2000; Vandell et al., 2005). High levels of motivation and interest ensure that youth become engaged with the program's goals, adopt them as their own (Pearce & Larson, 2006), and stick around long enough to achieve the benefits that participation affords.

A key to accomplishing these goals is an intentional focus (Walker, 2006). Youth programs must deliberately create opportunities for youth to serve as officers, teach their peers and younger members, participate on advisory committees, and design projects. Program cycles of planning and performance allow young people to experiment, receive feedback, and learn from mistakes (Deschenes, McDonald, & McLaughlin, 2004; Halpern, 2006). Ultimately young people discover that they can get good at something through this sort of learning process.

Youth programs are thus in an ideal position to ensure that workforce preparation is aligned with adolescents' developmental needs. They often have the autonomy and flexibility to create a curriculum that is tailored to the community. All of these characteristics make them well suited to playing a role in workforce preparation.

The Positive Youth Development Approach

Programs that produce positive outcomes don't happen by accident, and they share common ground, including a positive youth development approach. In contrast to a deficit perspective, a positive youth development approach is based on the premise that youth are

resources to be developed (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Witt & Caldwell, 2005). Current models focus on the concept of thriving, which goes beyond simply eliminating negative behaviors to promoting positive development for all youth (Lerner, Dowling, & Andersen, 2003). Certain key features characterize positive youth development settings. One widely used set of features is that of Eccles and Gootman (2002):

- An environment that ensures physical and psychological safety
- Clear and consistent structure and an appropriate level of adult supervision
- Supportive relationships with adults
- Opportunities to belong
- Positive social norms
- Opportunities to take leadership and make meaningful contributions
- Opportunities for engagement in learning, skill building, and mastery
- Integration of family, school, and community efforts

Of these, two features are particularly relevant for our discussion of workforce preparation: supportive adults and engagement in learning.

Supportive Adults

Quality youth programs are characterized by positive adult-youth interaction (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Grossman, Campbell, & Raley, 2007). Such relationships are critical in providing a safe and supportive environment in which youth can take on new challenges and develop their skills (Pearce & Larson, 2006; Rhodes, 2004). Adults often walk a fine line between too much and too little involvement (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005). Though youth programs present opportunities for young people to interact with positive adult role models and to have meaningful responsibilities (Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Hansen et al., 2003), the potential exists for negative interactions between youth and adult leaders. Though such negative experiences can eventually lead to positive outcomes, in the meantime they can interfere with youth development goals, particularly if young people drop out of activities (Dworkin & Larson, 2007). Recognizing the centrality of adults' roles, youth programs often put considerable effort into training staff and volunteers.

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Engagement in Learning

Quality youth programs emphasize learning that is fun (Hamilton et al., 2004). As young people learn new skills and gain recognition for their accomplishments, the emphasis is on mastery, not on being tested and graded. Program activities allow participants to exercise self-determination, learn how to make decisions, and work cooperatively with others. Activities that are engaging often do not have prescribed outcomes; they require the application of critical thinking and problem solving to achieve goals. Often, youth assume leadership positions and serve as role models for younger participants (Digby & Ferrari, 2007). Such learning experiences enhance identity development as adolescents test out new roles and relationships. The authentic learning experiences provided by youth programs can help reduce boundaries between formal and non-formal education (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003), thereby connecting the various contexts of adolescent life. The outcomes of a positive youth development approach have been referred to as the six Cs: caring, connection, confidence, competence, character, and contribution (Lerner et al., 2005).

Youth programs that emphasize positive youth development already provide support and opportunities for youth as they transition through key phases of their life, including the school-to-work transition. Youth programs can build on this truth by combining a positive youth development philosophy with an intentional focus on workforce preparation, specifically through work-based learning.

Work-based Learning in Out-of-School Youth Programs

Although work-based learning comes in many forms, it can be defined simply as "learning activities that use the workplace as a site for learning" (Keating, 2006, p. 2). Work-based learning can encompass a wide variety of program models, all of which are "occurring intentionally in a location where the primary activity is producing goods or services" (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997, p. 6) and therefore bring employers and youth into contact. In this model, young people are not just learning *about* work by *observing* it, but they are learning *in* and *through* work by *doing* it (Keating, 2006).

We focus below on three approaches to work-based learning:

- "Value added": enhancing an existing youth program with a work-based learning approach
- "Growing your own" (a term borrowed from Matloff-Nieves, 2007): instituting work-based learning by hiring program participants as staff

- Partnering with employers in the community to create worksite placements for program participants

These three approaches are not mutually exclusive, nor do they need to build one on another in a progression. A youth program could conceivably apply all three approaches. All three are built on the following principles of work-based learning.

Principles of Work-based Learning

We synthesized the following 10 principles of work-based learning from our own experience (Cochran, Arnett, & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari, Arnett, & Cochran, 2008) and from other sources including community-based and school-based programs (Brown & Thakur, 2006; DeCoursey & Skyles, 2007; Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997; Hamilton et al., 2004; Keating, 2006; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2007; Matloff-Nieves, 2007; New Ways to Work, 2003). How the principles are put into practice will differ depending on community situations and organizational goals.

1. Ground work-based learning programs in a positive youth development philosophy. This recommendation should be self-evident, but we feel it cannot be overstated. The key features of positive youth development must provide the foundation for work-based learning programs in order to meet adolescents' needs in developmentally appropriate ways. When work-based learning programs are based on youth development principles, they are more likely to accomplish their objectives.

2. Establish partnerships for worksite placements. Employers play a key role, from outlining the skills needed to creating opportunities to learn those skills. One of the first steps in developing work-based learning programs is to recruit employers willing to use a developmental approach in working with youth. Youth development professionals can recruit employers by appealing to their mission, civic interest, and community commitment, since businesses with such concerns would likely be predisposed to working with youth to enhance their development (DeCoursey & Skyles, 2007; Whalen et al., 2003). Obviously the strength of employer partnerships affects program quality. Strong partnerships depend on building relationships and maintaining communication.

3. Make good matches between youth and employers. Youth programs must gather enough information to understand the worksites, the work environment, the

job duties, and the individuals involved. They need to ensure a balance between sufficient challenge and sufficient support, considering the type of support the young people need and how frequently they need it.

4. Provide opportunities for skill-building and career awareness. Since many of the skills needed for workforce success develop over time and must be learned through active participation, work-based learning programs are ideal places to teach those skills. Worksite placements will likely combine both general knowledge-economy skills and job-specific skills. These skills may be reinforced in specific skill-building sessions or may be embedded in the work experience, where, for instance, youth learn interpersonal skills, cooperation, and teamwork by actually working as part of a team.

5. Provide authentic experiences with high expectations. Work-based learning programs must provide real experience, not busywork. Also, simply doing the work is not enough. Employers and program staff should hold participants to high expectations and provide honest evaluations. If the goal is improvement, then mistakes are part of the process. Young people who face high expec-

tations are more likely to be well prepared for work and life. The *learning* part of work-based learning comes when youth reflect on what they have learned at work. Whether the means include group discussions, journals, one-on-one meetings, or other strategies, opportunities for such reflection should not be left to chance.

6. Consider opportunities for increasing responsibility and reward. The practice of paying a salary or providing incentives can be an important part of an authentic experience. The financial rewards may motivate teens to stay connected at a time when many lose interest or drop out because outside work conflicts with their participation (Pittman et al., 2003). As skills are mastered, work experiences can become progressively more challenging and complex; the reward of increased responsibility becomes intrinsically motivating. Programs and employers should gradually build levels of responsibility through scaffolded leadership opportunities.

7. Provide orientation and training for adult staff and teens. Training and support for employers, who may not be well prepared for working with young people and the challenges of supporting their development, is vital, par-

ticularly because interactions in the job settings typically available to teens are not always supportive (Bryant et al., 2004). Orientation and training provides clear expectations and builds skills for both youth and adults.

8. Monitor and support participants and employers throughout the process. Teens may require support to be successful on the job, but many employers are not prepared to deal with issues teens bring to the workplace. Youth programs should create a plan for providing such support. Periodic site visits or phone calls can encourage communication between the program and worksites. Regular sessions with youth participants build reflection and problem solving into the work experience. Regular checkpoints allow for mid-course corrections rather than waiting until the program ends.

9. Understand legal issues and comply with state and federal laws. Work-based learning program staff need to be aware of child labor laws, distinctions between employee (paid) and non-employee (unpaid) status, requirements for work permits and insurance, and what minors can and cannot do in the workplace.

10. Evaluate and provide feedback. Evaluation and feedback make the work experience a continuous learning experience. Work-based learning programs should gather data from youth and adults to meet both formative and summative evaluation needs. This information will also help with accountability to funders and other stakeholders.

Value Added
Youth programs have many ways to involve teens in carrying out leadership roles and performing community service. As Hamilton and Hamilton (2004) note, community service shares many characteristics with work. Both, for example, provide opportunities for gaining technical, personal, and social competence. Service learning and volunteering, because they use the community as a context for helping youth develop and apply skills, lead to positive youth development outcomes (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Keilsmeier, 2000). Community service can therefore be part of a comprehensive approach to workforce preparation. Programs that already provide high-quality youth development can, by intentionally applying work-based learning principles, also provide high-quality workforce development.

One example of this "value-added" approach comes from the Friends Care Intergenerational Garden, where a 4-H educator added a work-based learning component. Located at a nursing home, Friends Care was designed as a community service project that would also teach gardening skills. Youth participants interacted with senior citizens and adult garden mentors to plant, grow, harvest, and package food to deliver to consumers. As described by Arnett, Lekies, and Bridgeman (2008), Friends Care became a work-based learning opportunity through an intentional focus on workforce preparation, including the addition of performance appraisals, self-assessment, and reflection. Youth kept track of their hours on time cards and received biweekly paychecks adding up to as much as $250 for the summer. These practices encouraged responsibility and made the experience more like a real job. Staff reported that the young people responded positively, taking their responsibilities more seriously and increasing their ownership of the program. Friends Care thus enhanced its youth development goals by adding work-based learning (Arnett et al., 2008).

In our own organization, Ohio State University Extension, we have targeted our 4-H camp counseling program for the value-added approach. Our past research shows that these camp counselors, who are volunteers rather than paid employees, develop valuable workplace skills (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). The 4-H educators who run the camps already use applications and interviews to select counselors. Next year, we plan to start adding skill sessions, performance appraisals, and reflection activities. We want the camp counselors to know that the skills they are gaining will transfer to their future workplaces.

These examples show how organizations that already offer good teen programming can grow by adding work-based learning and can transform work into learning. In either case, the value-added approach allows youth programs both to promote youth development outcomes and to build skills for the 21st century workplace.

Growing Your Own

"Growing your own" describes a natural progression in a youth program from participant to teen leader to teen employee to adult staff member. Matloff-Nieves (2007) describes how older teens at the Queens Community House in New York have a chance to be hired as staff members to work with younger children. The jobs are structured like apprenticeships; younger staff are paired with more experienced staff members who help them develop skills. Youth employees learn through

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Benefits of Work-based Learning

YOUTH
- **Learn social norms of the workplace**
- **Make connections between real work expectations and what they learn in school**
- **Pursue education with a greater sense of purpose**
- **Interact with positive adult role models**
- **Develop new skills**
- **Receive feedback on their skill development**
- **Experience enhanced self-concept and self-esteem**
- **Expand their horizons and awareness of future work options**

EMPLOYERS
- **Enhance skills of their employees—for example, learning to supervise others**
- **Realize contributions youth can make to the workplace**
- **Give back to the community**
- **Get a chance to have good teen employees**

YOUTH PROGRAMS
- **Accomplish their mission**
- **Meet youths' developmental needs**
- **Retain teens in their programs**
- **Add authenticity and relevance to the learning experiences they provide**

YOUTH PROGRAMS AS EMPLOYERS
All of the benefits above for employers and youth programs, plus:
- **Groom potential employees**

Sources: Bailey, Hughes, & Moore, 2004; Ferrari, Arnett, & Cochran, 2008; Halpern, 2006; Matloff-Nieves, 2007; New Ways to Work, 2003; Partee, 2003; Whalen, DeCoursey, & Skyles, 2003

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experience, observation, supervisor guidance, and a formal evaluation system that incorporates reflection and planning for growth. In order to maintain employment, youth employees must attend school. If their grades drop, their work schedules may be adjusted.

Growing your own makes sense from a youth development perspective: Youth program jobs offer increasingly challenging responsibilities in a way that facilitates development of workforce skills and dispositions. From a practical standpoint, growing your own addresses current staffing needs and develops future employees who are committed to the organization's mission (Matloff-Nieves, 2007). Of course, youth programs that employ teens should be intentional in implementing the principles of work-based learning to ensure that the work experiences they provide are positive ones.

Community Employers

When partnering with employers in the community to provide work experience for young people, it's up to the youth program to ensure that learning is not left to chance. An example of such a program is Job Experience and Training (JET), part of a comprehensive 4-H youth development program at Adventure Central in Dayton, Ohio (Cochran, Arnett, & Ferrari, 2007). JET is conducted over a period of six months, culminating in an eight-week summer work experience. After an open house that explains the program, teens participate in a session on application and interviewing skills before actually interviewing. They may be selected as *teen assistants,* volunteers who receive gift cards as incentives, or as *teen apprentices,* employees paid minimum wage.

The worksites are park facilities. Adults at each site agree to serve as supervisors. At the beginning of the summer, a one-day orientation for all teen and adult participants reviews youth-adult partnerships, experiential learning, work expectations, and the performance appraisal process. A series of training opportunities engages teens alone, supervisors alone, and teens and supervisors together in work-based learning. All JET participants complete self-directed learning journals and attend team meetings every two weeks. Adventure Central's focus on science and nature and the connection to the citywide park system expose youth to new career options. Our comparison of final performance appraisals with early assessments showed that the youth improved their workforce skills (Ferrari, Arnett, & Cochran, 2008).

Benefits and Challenges of Work-based Learning

Work-based learning can have a positive impact on the young participants, the businesses or organizations that employ them (DeCoursey & Skyles, 2007; Ferrari et al., 2008), and the youth programs. Halpern (2006) found that teen apprenticeships created a rich learning environment where participants developed skills in areas such as teamwork, professionalism, and communication. Employers are often pleasantly surprised with the contributions that youth make (Ferrari et al., 2008; Whalen et al., 2003). Other positive effects are summarized in the box "Benefits of Work-based Learning." Achieving these benefits is contingent on a positive youth development philosophy including strong adult supervision, mentoring, and skill development (Bryant et al., 2004; Ferrari et al., 2008).

Work-based learning requires commitment from participating youth, employers, and youth programs.

The box "Challenges of Work-based Learning" outlines some of the difficulties these parties face. To overcome these challenges, youth development professionals can prepare teens with skill-building and work-readiness sessions. They can assist employers in understanding the needs of youth so that employers are ready when young people arrive on the job. Some employers are willing to hire teen employees if they can be assured that the youth program will provide adequate supervision (S. Matloff-Nieves, personal communication, December 19, 2007).

Challenges of Work-based Learning

YOUTH
- **May have trouble meeting program and workplace expectations for attendance, dress code, and appropriate language**
- **Have little or no prior experience in the work world**
- **Face logistical challenges such as transportation**

EMPLOYERS
- **Must be convinced they will gain from participation**
- **May be hesitant to hire youth, fearing they will not be ready for work**
- **Differ in their capacity to provide a work experience that is also a learning experience**
- **May lack experience in supporting the developmental needs of teens**
- **May have to change policies and practices to provide quality work experiences**

YOUTH PROGRAMS
- **May be hampered by short time frames for producing program results**
- **Face difficulties in investing the time needed to recruit employers, provide training and support, and monitor program implementation**
- **Have to complete considerable paperwork in order to provide financial incentives, which can be vital for the neediest youth**
- **May encounter policies that require paid staff to be 18 years of age**

YOUTH PROGRAMS AS EMPLOYERS
All of the challenges above for employers and youth programs, plus:
- **May encounter challenges from funders who are resistant to proposals that include paying teens**
- **Must screen teens who will be working directly with younger children in out-of-school-time programs**

Sources: Bailey, Hughes, & Moore, 2004; Cochran & Ferrari, 2008; DeCoursey & Skyles, 2007; S. Matloff-Nieves, personal communication, December 19, 2007; New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, 2006

An intentional approach can maximize factors that contribute to a positive work experience and minimize those that create negative conditions.

Roles for Youth Programs

Once convinced of the need for and the benefits of work-based learning, and armed with the principles of positive youth development, youth professionals can provide teens with work-learning experiences that will prepare them for work in the 21st century knowledge economy. DeCoursey and Skyles (2007) suggest that youth programs can both prepare youth with workplace readiness skills and collaborate with employers to ensure that young people's work experiences are successful. Because adolescent employment can have both positive and negative outcomes, youth programs should consider how to connect with employers to ensure quality work experiences. A supportive environment can help overcome potential negative outcomes of adolescent employment while preparing youth for the 21st century workplace.

Youth programs are in an ideal position to bring together different sectors of the community to assist adolescents with successful transitions to the workforce. Youth development professionals can draw on their community connections to convene partners and bring together the right resources (DeCoursey & Skyles, 2007). They can also educate communities about the need for developmentally appropriate policies and promote workforce preparation programs as a funding priority.

Youth programs can also engage parents as part of the support system for young people in the school-to-work transition. Parents are primary figures in the lives of their children; ideally, they provide home environments conducive to learning goal-directed behaviors (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathnude, Whalen, & Wong 1997), communicate values about work (Levine & Hoffner, 2006), and play significant roles in decision making about their children's future. Several authors point to the critical role parents can play in supporting adolescents' workforce preparation (America's Promise, 2006; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). Although many parents are supportive, in one survey 40 percent of adolescents said they do not have parents who are involved in their education (America's Promise, 2006). While some young people say they lack family involvement during the

The time is right for youth programs to consider a more intentional role in supporting adolescents' workforce preparation. Youth development and workforce preparation are really two sides of the same coin.

career choice process (Ferry, 2006), parents express concern that they cannot provide appropriate guidance for their children without assistance (Reagor & Rehm, 1995). However, educational programs that specifically seek to engage parents and address their role in workforce preparation and career development are virtually nonexistent (Ferrari, 1992). Programs with a youth development approach can help fill that gap.

Most youth programs are designed to meet the needs of a local community. That is where the rest of the work remains in order to realize the full potential of workforce preparation programming. Whether transforming existing efforts, starting new work-based learning programs, growing their own, working with employers, or connecting with parents, the time is right for youth programs to consider a more intentional role in supporting adolescents' workforce preparation. Youth development and workforce preparation are really two sides of the same coin. Using a workforce preparation lens will improve both workforce preparation *and* youth development programs. Young people will be better prepared for work, and society will benefit. The importance of preparing youth for success in the knowledge economy of the 21st century must not be underestimated. The future depends on it.

Acknowledgments

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