



## Making Summer Count

### Youths' Perceptions of Meaningfulness and Future Orientation in Summer Youth Employment Contexts

**Denise Jones, Zaida Pearson, Deanna C. E. Sinex, Jeremiah Nash, Aiwen Chen, & Dennis F. Jones**

Summer is a unique time for students to extend the gains made during the school year by engaging in opportunities that support their growth and development. For younger teens, these opportunities may focus on developing relationships and competence; older youth may want to gain experience in the labor market (Afterschool Alliance, 2010). One such opportunity, summer youth employment programming, gives students first-time work experiences that support their entrance into the labor force. Summer employment programs boast many benefits that enable young people to explore career interests, gain connections to employers, develop a concept of work culture and expectations, and learn how to navigate professional spaces. Although such programs are beneficial to all

students, they are particularly useful for students of color. Marginalized youth are more likely to face discriminatory hiring practices and lower wages, both of which negatively impact their ability to envision their future selves and acquire financial security (Lansing

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**DENISE JONES** is a PhD candidate in the Combined Program in Education and Psychology at the University of Michigan. Her work lies at the intersection of public health, psychology, and the learning sciences.

**ZAIDA PEARSON** is an undergraduate student in psychology at the University of Michigan.

**DEANNA C. E. SINEX**, PhD, is the director of research and program strategy at Youth Enrichment Services (YES), a nonprofit youth development organization in Pittsburgh.

**JEREMIAH NASH** is an undergraduate student in sociology at Morehouse College.

**AIWEN CHEN** is an undergraduate student at Carnegie Mellon University majoring in neuroscience and minoring in philosophy.

**DENNIS F. JONES**, PhD, is the executive director of YES.

et al., 2018). Summer youth employment programs can address this disparity by improving the economic, behavioral, and academic outcomes of students of color (Modestino & Nguyen, 2016).

Immediate benefits for students include earning a paycheck, learning job-related skills such as teamwork, and improving their work ethic (Marshall, 2018). The impact of summer youth employment programs can extend into the school year; schools see decreases in school absences and improvements in performance on state exams among participants in summer employment programs (Modestino & Paulsen, 2023). These benefits are particularly relevant for students of color, who often face educational disparities (Modestino & Paulsen, 2023). Furthermore, the benefits continue when participants enter the workforce, because summer employment programs can improve participants' confidence in completing what employers expect of them (Orrell & Ouellette, 2008). Summer employment programs can also help participants develop a wide range of skills and abilities that can be translated into many aspects of their lives, from time management skills to responsibility, motivation, and self-confidence (Leos-Urbel, 2014).

Exposing youth to many career options also helps to shape and develop their career aspirations. Summer employment programs can help young people achieve their goals by pushing them to think about the steps necessary to achieve those goals, such as enrolling in career training or attending college (Modestino & Nguyen, 2016).

Studies on summer youth employment programs tend to examine youth outcomes, such as work readiness and professional skills; very few measure the mechanisms that produce positive youth outcomes, particularly the meaningfulness of students' work experiences (Ross & Kazis, 2016). Summer employment programs can not only provide participants with work experience, but also expose them to career pathways that relate to their interests while beginning to orient them toward a meaningful and stable future (Mortimer, 2010). Summer work experiences can be constructed to be meaningful through three main elements: exposing youth to new possibilities for their

future, enabling them to engage with a positive support network that allows them to feel connected and needed, and giving them a sense of ownership over their work (Lansing et al., 2018). Taken together, these elements provide the foundation of a meaningful work experience. However, the types of work in which young people engage can further extend the relevance of the work to their lives and future goals (Lansing et al., 2018).

Furthermore, summer youth employment programs can facilitate participants' access to four main types of capital: financial, human, social, and cultural capital (Lansing et al., 2018). *Financial capital* refers to the money earned by an individual; summer employment programs provide access to financial capital by paying participants for their work (Lansing et al., 2018). These programs have both immediate and long-term impacts on participants' wages. They not only provide immediate income but also support development of skills that have the potential to increase participants' income over time (Ross & Kazis, 2016). Access to financial capital is particularly important for marginalized youth, who both can use the new income to fulfill immediate personal and family needs and can gain meaningful work experience that enhances future employment and earnings (Betcherman et al., 2007; Edelman & Holzer, 2013).

*Human capital* refers to the idea that work and educational opportunities facilitate the development of skills that allow young people to access labor-market opportunities that were formerly unavailable (Modestino & Paulsen, 2019). Access to *social capital* is often an important component of summer employment programs, which help participants develop supportive connections with employers and mentors who can support them in navigating their social worlds successfully (Greene & Seefeldt, 2023; McMurphy et al., 2013). Furthermore, these supportive networks can help young people to develop their goals and then work to achieve those goals (Greene & Seefeldt, 2023). *Cultural capital* refers to an individual's knowledge about expectations, behaviors, and values that are culturally appropriate (Lansing et al., 2018). Summer work experiences provide a space in which

Furthermore, summer youth employment programs can facilitate participants' access to four main types of capital: financial, human, social, and cultural capital.

participants can acquire what are typically called “soft skills,” understand workplace expectations, and learn to navigate social situations in the workplace (Ross & Kazis, 2016). Summer youth employment programs not only provide access to these four types of capital, but also facilitate integration; that is, they help participants recognize these types of capital and learn how to leverage them in a variety of contexts (Lansing et al., 2018).

Access to capital and skill development alone do not necessarily translate into a meaningful work experience (Lansing et al., 2018). To be seen as meaningful by the youth participants (not just adult stakeholders), the work experience must be translated into a personally relevant experience in the context of their lives. Summer employment programs can support this translation by providing mentors and employers who help young people develop their sense of self and decide on long-term goals (Greene & Seefeldt, 2023). Furthermore, the social networks that young people develop in their summer work experience can help them understand how to apply the skills they learn to new contexts, supporting their ability to achieve their goals (Herrygers & Wieland, 2017). A work experience is meaningful for youth when it helps them to see both themselves and their world differently (Lansing et al., 2018).

Research on young people’s conceptualizations of meaningful work in the context of summer youth employment programs tends to focus on students 18 years of age or older. Less is known about the experiences of young people between the ages of 14 and 17, how they define meaningful work, and how summer employment programs affect their interests and goals. The current study explores the efforts of one summer youth employment program to provide students with meaningful work experiences and the participants’ perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work and its effect on their future orientation. Most of the students in the study were under the age of 18. The Youth Enrichment Services (YES) Summer Learn and Earn program provides students with summer enrichment, their first work experience, and

meaningful opportunities to engage with work. The YES context illustrates how providing youth with meaningful work experiences supports their future career interests and goals.

## Context: Youth Enrichment Services

### Organizational Context

YES is a community-based organization in Pittsburgh that gives socially and economically disadvantaged youth opportunities to achieve success through its academic enrichment, alternative to detention, peer mentor certification, life skills, cultural enrichment, diversity awareness, workforce readiness, and wellness-based programming. Since 1994, YES has served over 5,000 youth ages 10 to 24, empowering them to become their own best resource. YES prides itself on giving youth of color opportunities to explore, challenge, and rewrite limiting and harmful narratives they have been given by society. YES prioritizes youth on the margin; it directly confronts the social, economic, and academic injustices and disparities that overwhelmingly affect them.

YES has over 30 years of experience co-creating and implementing youth engagement programs and strategies for change alongside youth, their families, and critical stakeholders. YES is expert in meeting youth where they are and uplifting them toward where they aspire to be. YES’s goal is to create a catalytic environment that fosters autonomy, cultivates ideation, nurtures assets, contributes to young peoples’ holistic well-being, and provides exposure to help youth articulate and narrow in on their academic, career, and personal pursuits. These goals reflect YES’s mentorship premise (see Jones et al., 2021) and highlight YES’s commitment to holistic youth development. YES’s summer employment program is one programmatic effort to help youth redefine success; strive toward their self-identified life goals; envision bold possibilities; and create personal, academic, and career conditions that enable them to thrive. YES’s summer vision and goals complement the mission and vision of YES, which seek to empower youth and

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families to become their own best resource through targeted programming.

### Summer Employment Context

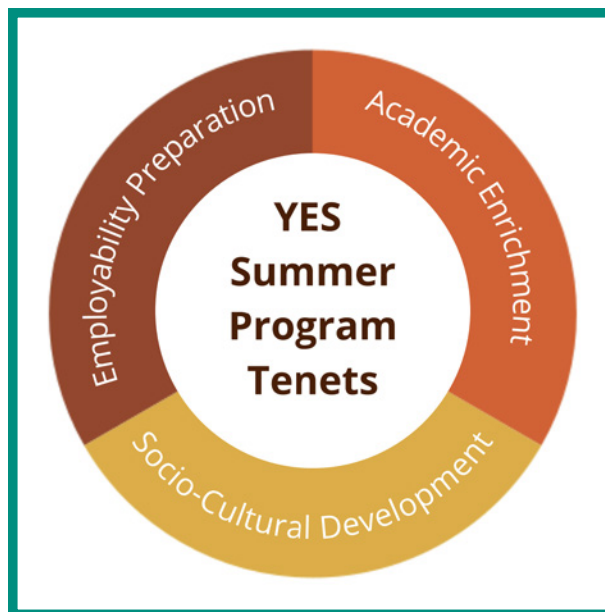
As previous research suggests, summer employment is a critical and defining experience for young people (Modestino & Nguyen, 2016; Modestino & Paulsen, 2019, 2023). YES goes beyond traditional employment to create an experience that is transformative rather than transactional. All participants engage in a robust and comprehensive employment experience that hones their skills, directs their path, builds their network of peers and professionals, and equips them for future opportunities. YES operates a comprehensive eight-week summer employment program, called Learn and Earn, which provides underserved youth, ages 14 to 21, with employment in and around Pittsburgh. Learn and Earn students work in diverse jobs and occupational areas to gain professional experience, technical skills, and knowledge of employer expectations, as well as exposure to possible career paths. In addition to developing valuable work experience, participants also earn wages and so contribute to Pittsburgh's tax base and economic growth. Through the program, participants come to understand appropriate workplace behaviors; they also learn the rigors of the workplace, develop hard and soft skills, and explore career interests and opportunities.

The transformative learning experience extends beyond employment. YES participants not only engage as employees at their worksites but also participate in social and cultural outings with their peers and explore learning through experiential courses, for a total of 25 hours per week. YES summer programming leverages evidence-based practices and literature that reinforces the importance of supplementing students' workforce skill building with peer relationship development and academic enrichment (Ryan et al., 2019).

YES can be distinguished from other programs by its mentorship approach. YES mentoring, which is central to the organization's philosophy, is used to convey, inspire, and uphold strong personal self-conduct. YES weaves mentorship into its summer program infrastructure, focusing on employability preparation, academic enrichment, and sociocultural development, as shown in Figure 1. These elements guide YES's summer programming efforts and function interconnectedly to maximize participants' summer experiences, prepare them for future

employment, broaden their academic possibilities, and deepen their peer and community connections.

Figure 1. The YES Summer Program Model



### Employability Preparation

Employability preparation is a central component of the YES program model. YES exposes youth to diverse careers and work environments to help them develop knowledge of employer expectations and workplace behavior. Working as consultants, collaborators, and partners, YES participants make meaningful contributions to their workplaces' missions. In Summer 2023, YES engaged participants in diverse employment experiences that facilitated their workforce development. Workplaces ranged from community-based entities and museums to local businesses and universities, as shown in Table 1 (next page).

### Academic Enrichment

Academic enrichment is an essential element of the YES program model. In response to summer learning loss and the educational disparities impacting underserved youth (Alexander et al., 2007; Cooper, 2007; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020), YES prioritizes experiential learning opportunities that help students improve their academic aptitude, postsecondary preparedness, and connection to learning. Participants' academic experiences are channeled through experiential learning courses and participatory and project-based research projects that

**Table 1. Youth Work Sectors and Sites by Number of Students**

Industry Sector	Number of Sites	Number of Students
Agriculture	1	1
Business services	1	3
Carpentry	2	3
Childcare/summer camp	8	29
Culinary	1	5
Entrepreneurship	1	4
Finance	1	7
Government	1	2
Media and marketing	3	4
Museum education	3	9
Nursing home	1	5
Operations	1	8
Recreation	3	6
Research	2	2
Skill development and training	1	3
Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)	2	2
Youth education	2	4

reflect their real-life experiences, passions, interests, and curiosities. Youth participants are on the front line of these investigations, in which they develop tangible skills that transcend their summer experience.

### Sociocultural Development

Sociocultural development is the final dimension of the YES program model. YES aligns with the belief that learning happens within social contexts and through peer interactions, which are mediated by culture, language, and environment (Vygotsky, 1987; White, 2010). YES therefore cultivates a space in which students learn in community with others and through positive peer interactions. Because learning is a cultural process, YES creates sociocultural experiences that expose participants to new opportunities while prioritizing their socially situated and culturally valued ways of knowing, being, and acting, as recommended

by previous research (Nasir et al., 2014). YES incorporates young people’s cultural practices and lived experiences into programming, especially through social and cultural outings, unique learning opportunities that enable participants to strengthen peer bonds and develop alliances.

### Tiered Program Pathway

The YES summer program is also unique in that it facilitates a graduated engagement process to make programming accessible to a broad range of participants with varied developmental needs. YES tailors the three types of services described above to young people in three tiers: Summer Scholars, Advanced Summer Scholars, and YES Veterans. As outlined in Table 2 (next page), these groups are formed by age, experience, and grade level. Summer Scholars are 14-year-olds with minimal work experience seeking experiential

learning opportunities, peer development, and career exposure. Their work experiences are mostly in-house at YES. Advanced Summer Scholars, typically ages 15 to 17, build on their previous work experience with YES at external locations across the city. YES Veterans are college- and career-bound youth who have engaged in YES programming for three or more years or are older than 18. They design their own leadership positions or internships within YES or at local institutions while completing independent studies as part of their work experience.

All participants’ work experience is complemented with academic enrichment and sociocultural development opportunities. As they move through the three-tiered program pathway, participants deepen their technical skills, build their leadership capacity in employment settings, and ignite their intellectual curiosity through research.

**Table 2. YES Cohorts and Program Opportunities**

Cohort	Age / Level	Work Opportunities	Academic Enrichment	Sociocultural Development
Summer Scholars	14 years old Entering high school or 10th grade Limited or no job experience	In-house apprenticeships	Youth participatory action research course Storytelling course	Wellness Wednesdays Trip Thursdays Violence prevention symposia Cultural trip
Advanced Summer Scholars	15–17 years old Current high school students Previous Learn and Earn participants or students with limited work experience	External site placements	Experiential learning course	
YES Vets	18–21 years old High school graduates or college students Longtime YES participants with ample work experience	Internships and independent study	Independent research project	

### Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to better understand YES participants’ perceptions of the meaningfulness of their summer work experiences. A secondary goal was to investigate how participants’ work experiences related to their future orientations. The study sought to answer the following guiding questions:

1. Do participants find their summer work experiences meaningful? Do their perceptions of meaningfulness differ by cohort or by work placement?
2. Did participants’ work experiences influence their future career orientations? Do their perceptions of future orientation differ by cohort or by work placement?

### Methodology

To answer this study’s research questions, we used data from a larger evaluation study of YES seeking to understand the summer experiences of participants and how effective YES was at achieving program goals. The main data source was pre- and post-participation surveys of YES participants.

### Participants

The 97 young people who completed both the pre- and post-participation surveys represent youth ages 14 to 20. They came from various neighborhoods and represented varied racial and ethnic groups, as shown in Table 3 (next page). A large majority of survey respondents were Black. The survey population was nearly evenly divided between male- and female-identifying young people. Over half of respondents were 15 or 16 years old. In keeping with this age division, most respondents were Advanced Summer Scholars; only 5 percent were YES Vets. Nearly all survey respondents were English speakers. These demographics are representative of those of the YES student population.

### Data Collection

Survey data from YES participants were collected twice during Summer 2023: once before the program began and again at the program’s end. To supplement these data, we leveraged select survey responses from our partnering workforce agency, which engaged youth in post-participation surveys. All participants had the opportunity to complete the YES 30-minute self-report

**Table 3. Survey Respondent Demographics**

Characteristic	Percentage of Respondents (N = 97)
<b>Race</b>	
Black	90%
White	4%
Asian	6%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	49%
Female	48%
Non-binary	2%
Fluid	1%
<b>Residential Status</b>	
City	64%
County	36%
<b>Language</b>	
English	93%
Persian	2.5%
Dari	4.5%
<b>Age</b>	
14	22%
15	26%
16	27%
17	15%
18	4%
19	4%
20	2%
<b>Cohort</b>	
Summer Scholars (age 14)	19%
Advanced Summer Scholars (ages 15–17)	76%
YES Vets (ages 18–21)	5%

online survey, which was administered during in-office training days, unless they declined participation or their parents opted them out. Data collection commenced

only after participants and families completed a consent form denoting their voluntary participation.

The surveys consisted of statements about meaningfulness and future orientation. Respondents rated each item on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We defined meaningfulness as a function of students’ satisfaction with their work experience, enjoyment of the work, feelings of being inspired by the work, capacity for making a positive difference, and personal growth at work. (The meaningfulness scale had five items, which are listed in brief, with their average scores, in Table 5.) Meaningfulness items were included only in the post-participation survey. Future orientation was defined as a sense-making mechanism by which individuals think about, plan for, assign meaning to, and execute their future goals and plans (Seigner, 2009). (The 11 items in the future orientation scale are listed, with their average scores, in Table 8.) Items assessing future orientation in general were included in both pre- and post-participation surveys, while those asking about the effect of the summer work experience on future orientation were included only in the post-participation survey.

**Data Analysis**

Likert scale data can be analyzed as either ordinal or interval data. For this study, we chose to interpret our Likert data as intervals because we aim to measure concepts (Sullivan & Artino, 2013), specifically meaningfulness and future orientation. We calculated means (averages) for each individual survey item and composite (total) scores for meaningfulness and future orientation with respect to cohorts and work placement industry sectors (Boone & Boone, 2012). To interpret our calculated means, we used the Pimentel (2010) interval framework. This framework, summarized in Table 4, minimizes interval biases in Likert responses.

**Table 4. Pimentel Likert Interval Framework**

Likert Scale Number & Description	Pimentel Likert Scale Interval
1, Strongly disagree	1.00–1.80
2, Disagree	1.81–2.60
3, Neutral/uncertain	2.61–3.40
4, Agree	3.41–4.20
5, Strongly agree	4.21–5.00

Because the Summer Scholars, Advanced Summer Scholars, and YES Vets had different opportunities and structures in their work experiences, we explored participant perceptions of meaningfulness and future orientation with respect to their cohorts. We also conducted an exploratory analysis to see whether any differences emerged among responses based on participants' work assignments. Though we analyzed pre- and post-participation scores on the future orientation items related to participants' general impression of their futures, we chose to report only post-participation scores. Other future orientation items and meaningfulness items have only post-participation scores. The differences among pre- and post-participation scores on the six future orientation items that have both were not significant enough to lead to meaningful conclusions.

## Results

Survey results indicate that, on the whole, YES participants found their summer work experience meaningful. They also had fairly strong future orientations. For both scales, we report on average scores for each item on the post-participation survey and then examine composite scores for each scale by YES cohort and by work sector.

## Meaningfulness

Average scores on the five survey items in the meaningfulness scale, shown in Table 5, range from 3.63 to 3.89. All of these scores, and the total composite meaningfulness score (3.73), fall within the Pimentel (2010) interval *agree*.

Next, we calculated composite scores combining all five meaningfulness items for each cohort of YES participants, as shown in Table 6. Using Pimentel interpretations, Summer Scholars and Advanced Summer Scholars *agreed* that their work experiences were meaningful, while YES Vets *strongly agreed*. These results should be interpreted with caution because the survey sample included only five YES Vets.

Table 7 displays students' post-participation perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work by industry sector. Young people who worked in government, research, and STEM all *strongly agreed* that their work experience was meaningful. Average scores for most other sectors fall into the Pimentel *agree* category. Average scores for participants in three sectors fall into the *neutral/uncertain* band; the one participant who worked in agriculture *disagreed* that their work experience was meaningful. The numbers of participants in almost all work sectors are quite small, so the results must be interpreted with caution. The sector with the

**Table 5. Meaningfulness Component Scores for All Participants**

Survey Item (rated on a scale of 1 to 5)	Mean Score	Pimentel Interpretation
My work experience was meaningful to me.	3.74	Agree
My work contributed to my personal growth.	3.73	Agree
I feel inspired at work.	3.63	Agree
My work made a positive difference in my community.	3.63	Agree
I enjoyed my work experience.	3.89	Agree
<b>Composite meaningfulness score</b>	<b>3.73</b>	<b>Agree</b>

Note: N = 97

**Table 6. Meaningfulness Composite Scores by Cohort**

Cohort	Number of Students	Mean Composite Score	Pimentel Interpretation
Summer Scholars	18	3.41	Agree
Advanced Summer Scholars	74	3.74	Agree
YES Vets	5	4.72	Strongly agree



**Table 7. Meaningfulness Composite Scores by Work Placement Sector**

Work Placement Industry Sector	Number of Sites	Number of Students	Mean Composite Score
<b>Strongly agree</b>			
Government	1	2	5.00
Research	2	2	4.90
STEM	2	2	4.40
<b>Agree</b>			
Skill development and training	1	3	4.07
Carpentry	2	3	4.00
Media and marketing	3	4	3.95
Recreation	3	6	3.87
Childcare/summer camp	8	29	3.84
Business services	1	3	3.80
Museum education	3	9	3.73
Finance	1	7	3.60
Youth education	2	4	3.50
Operations	1	8	3.45
<b>Neutral/uncertain</b>			
Culinary	1	5	3.28
Entrepreneurship	1	4	3.25
Nursing home	1	5	3.08
<b>Disagree</b>			
Agriculture	1	1	2.20

most participants, childcare/summer camp, with 29 participants, falls squarely in Pimentel’s *agree* band.

### Future Orientation

Table 8 displays average post-participation scores for each item in the future orientation scale. On average, YES participants *agreed* with most future orientation items. The highest scores indicate that participants believed they would have a successful future and understood that education and hard work would help them achieve that future. The lowest scores, falling into Pimentel’s *neutral* category, are on items related to the role participants’ worksites played in developing and solidifying their career interests and the extent to which their work experiences were aligned with their future goals.

Table 9 displays composite scores on the future

orientation scale, post-participation, by YES cohort. The total composite indicates a fairly strong future orientation, with scores increasing fairly steadily from the youngest cohort to the oldest. The composite scores of Summer Scholars and Advanced Summer Scholars fall into the *agree* Pimentel band. The composite scores of the five YES Vets fall into the *strongly agree* category.

We also analyzed post-assessment future orientation composite scores by participants’ work placement sectors, shown in Table 10. Three sectors, STEM, government, and youth education, fell into the *strongly agree* Pimentel band. Most sectors earned average future orientation scores in the *agree* band. The five participants with work assignments in nursing homes had the lowest average composite scores in future orientation.

**Table 8. Future Orientation Component Scores for All Participants**

Survey Item (rated on a scale of 1 to 5)	Mean Score
<b>Agree</b>	
I believe I will have a successful future.	4.08
I believe that getting an education will positively impact my future.	4.07
I believe that I can achieve a successful future if I work hard enough.	4.03
I often make plans for my future.	3.85
My family stresses that getting an education is important for future success.	3.71
This work experience has helped me to develop and/or gain skills that will be useful in my future career.	3.67
This work experience helped me to think about my future career opportunities.	3.58
The future I want to have is different from the future I expect to have.	3.51
<b>Neutral/uncertain</b>	
This work experience aligned with my future goals.	3.38
My worksite helped me to develop new career interests.	3.36
My worksite helped me to solidify my career interests.	3.21
<b>Composite future orientation score</b>	<b>3.85</b>

Note: N = 97

**Table 9. Future Orientation Composite Scores by Cohort**

Cohort	Number of Students	Mean Composite Score	Pimentel Interpretation
Summer Scholars	18	3.63	Agree
Advanced Summer Scholars	74	3.87	Agree
YES Vets	5	4.34	Strongly agree

## Discussion

This study sought to investigate YES participants’ perceptions of meaningfulness in their summer work experiences and examined how those experiences related to their future orientations. Composite average scores on the two survey scales indicated that YES participants as a group agreed that their summer work experience was meaningful and that they were oriented toward their futures. These findings, which are consistent with previous literature, underscore the importance of summer work experiences in creating meaningful opportunities for students, particularly youth of color (Orrell & Ouellette, 2008).

The YES Summer Learn and Earn program built all four types of capital that young workers need for a

solid start toward successful careers (Lansing et al., 2018). The immediate benefit was financial capital in the form of payment for their work. Financial capital is particularly important for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Betcherman et al., 2007; Edelman & Holzer, 2013). The program built human capital by teaching participants skills they can use to obtain and succeed in future jobs. Social capital came from the mentorship of YES staff and from connections with peers and supervisors at their worksites. Finally, participants, particularly those in their first jobs, gained cultural capital by learning the basics of what employers expect of employees.

Below we discuss conclusions we draw from results for specific survey items and from cohort and in-

**Table 10. Future Orientation Composite Scores by Work Placement Sector**

Work Placement Industry Sector	Number of Sites	Number of Students	Mean Composite Score
<b>Strongly agree</b>			
STEM	2	2	4.36
Government	1	2	4.29
Youth education	2	4	4.21
<b>Agree</b>			
Media and marketing	3	4	4.07
Carpentry	2	3	4.05
Recreation	3	6	4.05
Research	2	2	4.00
Skill development and training	1	3	4.00
Childcare/summer camp	8	29	3.98
Museum education	3	9	3.86
Operations	1	8	3.77
Finance	1	7	3.73
Business services	1	3	3.71
Entrepreneurship	1	4	3.64
Agriculture	1	1	3.57
Culinary	1	5	3.46
<b>Neutral/uncertain</b>			
Nursing home	1	5	3.34

industry sector results for both the meaningfulness and future orientation scales. We also suggest implications for research and practice.

### **Components of Meaningfulness and Future Orientation**

The scores on the five items in the meaningfulness scale fall within a narrow range. The highest rated item was that participants felt their work experience was meaningful, with slightly lower scores for enjoyment, inspiration, community contribution, and personal growth. However, the differences among scores are not large enough to suggest any conclusions.

Scores on items in the future orientation scale vary enough to permit observations about specific components of YES participants' future orientation. Partic-

ipants expressed the belief that their futures would be successful and that hard work and education are important catalysts for their future success. Respondents' identification of the value of education is consistent with previous literature (Davis & Niebes-Davis, 2010; Jamieson & Romer, 2008). Educational and work opportunities facilitate the growth of human capital, though participants may not have understood this connection. Oyserman and Destin (2010) note that adolescents sometimes can conceive of their futures but struggle to understand the mechanics and processes to achieve their vision. Our respondents expressed an understanding that hard work is fundamental to future success, but they may not have fully understood how human

capital translates into improved opportunities in the labor market.

YES participants agreed that their work experiences helped them think about the future. They were less likely to agree that their work experiences helped them to develop or solidify specific career interests. The fact that participants spent only six weeks at their summer worksites may be a factor. Developing or solidifying career interests takes time, as well as mentorship and resources. Participants also were less likely to agree that their summer work aligned with their future goals. However, they generally felt their experience was positive. The literature suggests that youth benefit from summer work experiences that are positive and meaningful, whether or not the experiences are future oriented (Briggs et al., 2019; Davis & Heller, 2017).

YES participants also tended to agree that they cultivated useful skills for their future careers. They were acquiring human capital they could use to improve their career opportunities. According to a survey conducted for the YES annual report, the skills they gained ranged from communication and time management skills to work ethic and collaboration skills. Taken together, the work placements supported the development of soft skills (YES, 2023). Also, these first-time work experiences built participants' cultural capital—their knowledge of workplace expectations and their ability to navigate workplace social contexts. Research shows that amassing transferable skills early not only helps young people achieve success in their careers and in other domains of their lives but also supports their advancement toward their postsecondary future selves (Carey, 2022).

### Differences by Cohort

Students' experiences of meaningfulness and future orientation differed by cohort. In both scales, composite scores tended to be lowest for Summer Scholars, somewhat higher for Advanced Summer Scholars, and highest for YES Vets. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that older students tend to find meaning in summer employment experiences (Modestino & Paulsen, 2023).

In general, younger students may not have explored or thought deeply about long-term career interests or goals. They may benefit from skills they learn from summer work as a foundation for skills they will develop as they are exposed to more career paths and career-affirming experiences. For the YES population specifically, one difference is the type of work assignments: Summer Scholars typically work in-house for YES, Advanced Summer scholars are assigned to workplaces throughout the city, and YES Vets typically craft their own work experience. This difference can help explain differences in the meaningfulness and future orientation scores. However, we must note that YES Vets were the smallest population, with only five respondents. Furthermore, YES Vets typically have participated in Learn and Earn in previous years; this experience could skew their responses.

Also, these first-time work experiences built participants' cultural capital—their knowledge of workplace expectations and their ability to navigate workplace social contexts.

### Differences by Industry Sector

YES participants' ratings of the meaningfulness and future orientation of their work based on their industry sector must be interpreted with caution because the numbers of participants in most sectors are quite small. Still, their responses may provide some insight. For example, the highest rating on the meaningfulness scale was in government work. YES participants who worked in local government had the opportunity to work alongside political leaders and explore real applications of government. STEM, research, and youth education also made it into the *strongly agree* band for one or both scales.

Some industries seemed more likely to facilitate participants' future thinking than others. More insights are needed to understand the mechanisms that support young people's future thinking and perceptions of meaningfulness in diverse industries. The literature suggest that relational, individual, structural, and ecological factors influence young people's future orientations (Seigner, 2009). Such components could be at play in YES participants' summer work experiences. The diversity of industries that fell within the *agree* band on the meaningfulness and future orientation scales highlights the need for further understanding.

### Implications

This study's findings are relevant both for the research community and for practitioners in youth employment contexts. The field needs more qualitative data on meaningfulness and future orientation, especially for younger youth of color. Specifically, future research should focus on developing a framework to understand how 14- to 17-year-olds make meaning from their work experiences. Furthermore, research could delve into what makes specific work experiences meaningful or enables them to foster future orientation in young workers. For example, if other studies show that work in government or STEM tends to be meaningful to young people, researchers could look more deeply into the young workers' experiences to determine what elements could be replicated in other work sectors.

The field also needs evidence about future orientation in work placements. Perhaps researchers can discover ways in which worksites can intentionally build in components where youth reflect on the experience and think about their futures. Such reflection may not occur by happenstance but only through purposeful planning.

One implication for practice is that practitioners must be intentional in developing summer youth employment programs that are meaningful and build participants' future orientations. Younger participants particularly, as first-time employees, must initially gain exposure to work experiences that foster and build their curiosity. Summer employment programs are designed to curate participants' learning experiences; practitioners should frame summer work experiences to integrate career exploration and long-term interest development, helping participants understand how early work experiences relate to future careers. For example, they can design programs to engage youth in career assessments, career mentorship, and project-based activities to elicit future opportunities. When possible, practitioners should engineer work experiences that align with participants' future goals.

## Conclusion

Participants in the YES Summer Learn and Earn program engaged in experiences that developed skills to support their academic and job-related interests and their competence in research and work skills. They also gained connection to adults who helped them develop and refine their career interests. The summer work experiences supported development of human and cultural capital by giving YES participants opportunities to develop soft and hard skills they can carry over into work contexts. Additionally, by providing work experiences that were meaningful and important, YES helped participants develop their confidence in professional spaces and their ability to acquire the future they dream of. Furthermore, participants engaged in mentorship relationships with YES staff, which provided access to social capital. The connections they built with mentors exposed them to various career pathways and different ways to think about the world. Taken together, participants' experiences in YES' Summer Learn and Earn program enabled them to develop critical skills, knowledge, and beliefs that will continue to support them long after they receive their final YES paycheck.

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