helping youth prepare for careers

What Can Out-of-School Time Programs Do?

by Kathryn Hynes, Kaylin M. Greene, and Nicole Constance

Dramatic changes in the labor market in the United States over the past 50 years have raised tremendous concern that many of our nation's youth are unprepared for the labor force. Policymakers and youth advocates are looking for strategies to improve the education system so that fewer youth drop out of high school and more have the skills and knowledge they need to contribute to the global economy. Initiatives such as Ready by 21 at the Forum for Youth Investment and the Mott Foundation's New Day for Learning highlight the importance of bringing together schools, workforce development programs, and out-of-school time (OST) programs to support youth to be successful in young adulthood. Indeed, many OST providers recognize the challenges facing youth and want to help. However, important questions remain: How can OST programs best support youths' career development? What do quality career programs look like? Will youth attend? Will these programs be effective?

This article draws from several disciplines to integrate what is and is not known about engaging youth in career programming during OST. We begin by describing the challenges youth face as they transition into the labor market and the difficulties facing schools and higher education. We then juxtapose research on the potential for OST programs to support career development against evaluation research showing the challenges of changing long-term labor market outcomes.

Next, we take a program-level approach to understanding OST career programming. We draw from our

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own study of 30 OST programs serving primarily low-income middle and high school youth to show the ways OST programs are currently supporting career development. We discuss some of the challenges of career programming and highlight how programs are overcoming these challenges. Our concluding discussion draws both from our own study and from the literature on education, workforce development, and OST programming to show how several OST programs are using scaffolding, in which youth move from lower-level experiences to more challenging ones, to keep youth engaged and progressing.

Should OST Programs Engage in Career Programming?

Many OST programs engage in career programming because of the challenges youth face in entering the labor market and because of difficulties in the education system.

Challenges for Low-income Youth Entering the Labor Market

During the post–World War II era, youth with a high school degree and a willingness to work could often find reasonable jobs and support a family. Since then, the labor market has changed considerably. Technological innovation, globalization, and the decline in unions have made finding good work particularly difficult for young men with limited education. Between 1973 and 2007, median annual earnings for young men with only a high school education actually *fell* in real terms by about a quarter (Danzinger & Ratner, 2010). The economic recession that began in early 2008 exacerbated the problem. The unemployment rate for adults with only a high school education rose from 5.5 percent in 2007 to 12.4 percent in 2010. Rates for those without a high school degree were even worse, rising from 9.6 percent in 2007 to 18.3 percent in 2010. In contrast, the unemployment rate for adults with a college degree was only 5.9 percent in 2010 (Holzer & Hlavac, 2011).

Twenty years ago, a major national commission concluded that many young workers lacked the skills necessary to succeed in the labor market. The SCANS report argued that, in addition to improving basic reading, writing, and math skills, workers also needed to develop skills in communication, resource allocation, decision making, problem solving, and using data (U.S.

Department of Labor, 1991). Despite many education reforms in the intervening years, employers continue to report that workers do not have the skills they need to keep companies competitive (Conference Board et al., 2006).

Difficulties in the Education System

Many youth programs work hard to help youth get into college. Clearly college provides a path to good, high-paying jobs. However, despite decades of effort, only 32 percent of young adults aged 25–29 have completed a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Many efforts have focused on getting youth *into* higher education; indeed, more youth enroll in college today than in the past. Unfortunately, many drop out. Only slightly more than half of students enrolled full-time in four-year institutions receive a bachelor's degree within six years; completion rates are lower for two-year degrees (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011). Debates about the best way to help these students are underway (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2011). Some argue for shifting the focus from college enrollment to college *completion* (Russell, 2011). Others argue that the focus on college completely fails students who never enter or are not properly prepared to attend college and that strategies to connect these students with work should also be examined (Rosenbaum, 2001). In this complicated environment, some OST programs focus on both college *and* career readiness.

Many efforts to support youth are underway in the K–12 education system. Some integrate career development into the curriculum, whether by adopting career education standards or by implementing schoolwide reform models like Career Academies (Kemple & Willner, 2008). However, many argue that schools, which already struggle to meet youths' needs, cannot—and should not have to—do it alone. Some schools partner with community-based organizations to provide OST learning opportunities for youth, such as the After School Matters apprenticeship programs in Chicago (Hirsch, Hedges, Stanwick, & Mekinda, 2011). In other cases, community-based organizations step in to provide career programming when schools do not. Although a wide variety of career supports are currently in use, clear evidence of their effectiveness has yet to emerge.

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How Can OST Programs Help?

That quality OST programs can improve youth outcomes has long been recognized. However, OST programs have an effect only if youth attend and participate. Meanwhile, recruiting and retaining older youth can be a formidable challenge. One promising finding from recent research is that some youth seem to enjoy career-related programming. In a previous study, we surveyed more than 135 OST programs serving middle and high school youth, finding that those offering career programming were significantly more likely to be full at the start and end of the year than other programs (Hynes, Miller, & Cohen, 2010). Similarly, in a study of nearly 200 OST programs in six cities, Deschenes and colleagues (2010) reported significantly higher youth retention rates for programs that offered leadership opportunities such as community service, youth councils, opportunities to design or lead activities for younger children, and paid youth staff positions. These activities, which build marketable job skills, are often included in career development programs.

In contrast to the challenges of recruiting and retaining older youth in traditional youth programs, demand for summer job programs appears to be high. When public funds became available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, states enrolled more than 313,000 youth in federally subsidized summer jobs (Bellotti, Rosenberg, Sattar, Esposito, & Ziegler, 2010). In many areas of the country, applications for these jobs exceeded available slots. Retention was high, with more 80 percent of these youth completing their summer experiences (Bellotti et al., 2010).

These findings linking career programming to recruitment and retention may reflect the fact that, conceptually, a career focus aligns well with best practices for engaging older youth in OST programming. Programs with high recruitment and retention often provide youth with opportunities to experience the real world, learn new skills, make a difference in the community, and practice autonomy and decision making (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hynes et al., 2010). Another reason career programming may appeal to youth is that it targets an important developmental need. Throughout middle and high school, youth should be engaged in establishing a vocational identity (Porfeli, 2008). Indeed, aiding youth in career exploration and decision making may be an important goal. Recent research shows that youth who are indecisive about their career plans have significantly lower wages in adulthood (Staff, Harris, Sabates, & Briddell, 2010).

Though there is a good conceptual link between OST and career programming, attempts to improve long-term career outcomes have been mixed. A recent evaluation of the After School Matters initiative showed that participation in an OST apprenticeship program was associated with higher reports of self-regulation and slower increases in problem behavior, but it was not associated with increased marketable job skills or academic outcomes (Hirsch et al., 2011). Other efforts to improve long-term career outcomes have been undertaken through the workforce development system. Again, even when programs are expensive, effects are small or fade out after a few years (Bloom, 2010). For instance, Job Corps, which provides education and job training in a residential setting for disadvantaged youth aged 16–24, led to short-term gains in employment and earnings. However, those positive effects faded out over time, leading researchers to question whether one-time interventions would be adequate to keep youth on a positive trajectory (Bloom, 2010). Research has not adequately explained why some efforts to improve labor market success work and others do not (Heinrich & Holzer, 2010), but issues such as inadequate staffing and training, short program duration, and the difficulty of replicating promising models appear salient (Miller, Bos, Porter, Tseng, & Abe, 2005; Schrim, Stuart, & McKie, 2006). Also, because promising programs often include many different activities, evaluations have yielded little information about *which* activities are most important (Arcaira, Vile, & Reisner, 2010).

Questions remain about the best way to assist youth in their transition to adulthood. On one hand, there is clearly a need for OST programs to provide critical supports. Youth appear interested in career-related programming, whose focus on building real-world skills through hands-on learning fits nicely with developmental theory. On the other hand, changing long-term labor market outcomes is extremely challenging, so programs should be realistic about what they promise to achieve. Finally, given the variety of ways schools and communities are implementing career programming and the real-

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ity of tight government budgets, researchers, practitioners, and funders need to work together to ensure that career development funds go into cost-effective strategies.

Engaging Youth in OST Career Programming

This section brings the discussion to the program level, drawing on our recent study of OST programs to ask: What exactly is "career programming" in OST? How are programs actually integrating career content? What do promising program models look like?

In 2011–2012, we collected extensive data, including hour-long interviews with directors, day-long program observations, and surveys of participating youth, on 30 OST programs serving primarily low-income middle and high school youth. We wanted to understand how OST programs integrated content about careers, what components of career programming engaged youth, and what obstacles interfered with successful career programming. We asked leaders in the field to identify programs that had a reputation for quality career programming. We included school-year and summer programs from across Pennsylvania with various funding sources and different approaches to career programming. Our research methodology and main findings are available in an online report (Hynes, Constance, Greene, Lee, & Halabi, 2011). This article draws from that study to show what OST career programming can look like. After outlining the three types of career programming we observed, we describe three specific programs that successfully engaged youth, highlighting the ways these programs overcame some common implementation challenges.

How OST Programs Are Implementing Career Programming

One of the main goals of our study was to understand what programs were actually doing when they said they provided career programming. Data from our study suggest that career programming falls into three categories:

- **Career exploration** activities help youth understand what careers are available and what skills and experience those careers require. Sometimes these activities are individualized, helping youth match their own strengths and interests to career paths. Other times, group activities teach youth about local industries or train them in vocations such as culinary arts or cosmetology.
- **Work experiences** give youth actual job experience, whether the work is done in the community or at the program. Some programs include training in work-

readiness skills, such as proper business behavior and communication. Others may include job-search skills such as interviewing.
- **Substantive theme** programming teaches youth occupation-specific or topic-specific skills and knowledge in such areas as technology, urban agriculture, or construction.

Separating these three types of career programming is useful because each type requires different resources, poses different challenges, and may influence different outcomes. A program could do just one type of programming, but many of the programs we studied included more than one type. Figure 1 (page 25) shows that seven out of 30 programs in our study combined substantive theme programming with career exploration, and four combined work experiences with substantive theme programming. Five of the 30 included all three types.

Challenges to Engaging Youth in Career Programming

As with any kind of youth programming, career programming offers challenges. Some challenges are *informational.* Programs that wanted to teach youth about available jobs sometimes struggled to find enough people with up-to-date information on available jobs and the skills and education they require. Other programs struggled to find people with adequate substantive knowledge to teach youth cutting-edge technology or science skills.

Another set of challenges revolved around providing *developmentally appropriate* programming. Some programs wanted to offer career programming at younger ages in order to help youth make good early decisions about school performance or class selection. Others worried about finding "good" jobs for youth, ones that could teach youth skills and knowledge useful for future careers. Still others focused on the need to take youth from where they are and support them as they move up to the next proficiency level.

Finally, *engaging* youth is always challenging. Some programs struggled to find topics or final projects that truly motivated older youth. Others cited challenges in finding programming or work experiences that were good matches for youths' own career interests. Still others wanted to keep youth engaged long enough to master a task or substantive area but struggled because other activities competed for youths' time or interest.

Creative Ways Real Programs Overcame These Challenges

This section highlights three programs—one from each type of career programming identified above—that effectively engaged youth in career-related activities. Our study was not an evaluation, so we did not explore whether these programs affected youth outcomes. Instead, we focused on whether they were able to *engage* older youth. We identified engaging programs using a comprehensive assessment that included youth-reported measures of engagement and of career-related learning, observer-reported measures of attendance and youth engagement, scores assigned by the research team about the likelihood that the program was improving important career-related skills, and director reports of enrollment and attendance. See Hynes et al. (2011) for a more detailed methodology.

Career Exploration

The Industry Clubs are career exploration programs supported by the Northwest Pennsylvania Workforce Investment Board (WIB), the regional workforce development group. The goal of the Industry Clubs is to expose middle school students to careers and industries that are growing in their local communities. Meeting

weekly after school for two hours, students did interest assessments, went on field trips to local work sites, and heard guest speakers talk about various jobs and fields. Clubs were led by a teacher or group of school personnel who received support from the WIB. The WIB funded the clubs and their transportation needs, provided information about growth occupations in the region, and helped to identify guest speakers and field trip sites. At the end of the semester, students from all of the regional clubs came together for a career expo. They gave presentations sharing what they learned about various careers and participated in hands-on activities and demonstrations.

The Industry Club model creatively overcame several challenges other programs cited about implementing career exploration activities. For instance, several programs reported difficulty in finding field trip locations and guest speakers. Some Industry Clubs arranged these experiences themselves, but others relied on the WIB, with its strong ties to local businesses and professionals. The Industry Clubs also relied on the WIB to solve the problem of providing up-to-date information about the training and education necessary for the jobs of interest to youth or about the careers that were expanding in the region. Finally, the Industry Clubs targeted middle school

Figure 1. Types of Career Programming
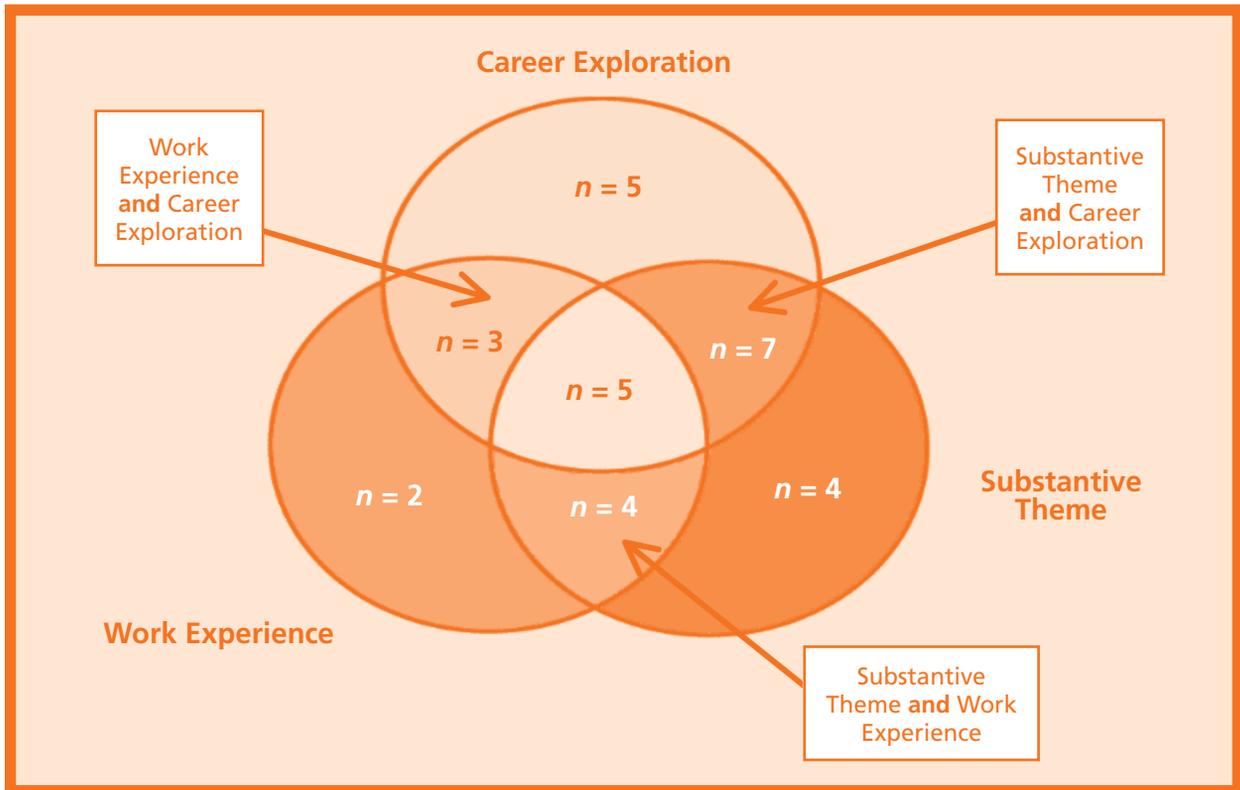
students instead of waiting until high school. An Industry Club leader explained the importance of focusing on middle school students: "We have students that are juniors and seniors that suddenly decide… 'Oh, I really want to be that [occupation]. What do I have to do?' Well, we have to back up two years in life—which is impossible—and get you on the right track…." Career exploration activities in middle school allow students to develop interests and then take the high school classes necessary to pursue those interests.

Substantive Theme Programming

Techno Teens is a substantive program that turns high school youths' love of video games into an opportunity to learn computer skills and explore technology-based careers. The goal of the program is for youth to design and produce an original video game. In our study, we saw youth working in teams to develop their game's story and design the game using computer software. They also learned about the business side of gaming by researching companies that sell video games, learning about the salaries of video game developers, and writing a marketing letter. Although the video gaming clearly sparked youths' interest, the program expanded their horizons by taking them on field trips to local companies and introducing them to people who used computer skills in a variety of professional-level jobs.

> Techno Teens used field trips to local companies to help youth see how the skills they were developing would help them get a range of professional jobs and to teach them what additional experiences and education they needed.

Techno Teens creatively overcame several obstacles that program leaders raised when discussing substantive career programming. It attracted and retained older youth by having a very clear, motivating outcome: Youth attended because they wanted to make video games. The computer skills and teamwork they learned were necessary to produce the end product. Another challenge is finding people who can teach sophisticated technical components. Techno Teens brought in a local computer expert. The program overcame the difficulty of retaining youth over time by running during the summer, 9:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m., five days a week, for three weeks, avoiding conflicts with other extracurricular activities. One youth programming expert in our study discussed such intensive time periods: "So often in the school setting, or the afterschool setting… you jump in, you do an activity, and…move on to the next thing, time's up!" This expert described the benefits of the longer blocks of time available in the summer:

> The education was happening then; I was not going to interfere with that. This activity that should have taken fifteen minutes… ended up taking about two and a half hours, and we sat down and we processed it. Those kids got more out of those two hours than if we would have pushed through.

Finally, Techno Teens used field trips to local companies to help youth see how the skills they were developing would help them get a range of professional jobs and to teach them what additional experiences and education they needed.

Work Experience

The Bethlehem Partnership for a Healthy Community, in order to increase the diversity of its workforce, runs a program designed to get at-risk immigrant youth involved in health-related careers. The program combines paid hospital work experience with ongoing training that includes work readiness, medical terminology, and even literacy. Our study showed that youth were performing necessary but age-appropriate tasks such as stocking supplies, preparing neonatal incubators, helping in the CAT scan lab, and transporting patients.

This program creatively overcame many of the challenges of placing youth in paid work. To reduce the burden on the hospital staff who were the day-to-day supervisors, the program provided intensive work-readiness training, and its staff monitored youth throughout the job placement. This supervision was critical to ensuring that youth were following instructions and helped to smooth over issues before they became major problems.

Also, finding "good" jobs for youth can be challenging. Research indicates that good jobs provide adequate supervision, feature age-appropriate responsibilities that are meaningful but not too stressful, and help youth see the importance of education (Staff & Schulenberg, 2010). Strong support from the hospital administration helped to ensure that this program gave youth good opportunities. A hospital is a good place for work experience because it has many professionals, doing many different kinds of jobs, with whom youth can be matched. Finally,

the work experience was clearly connected to "next steps" for students interested in long-term jobs at the hospital or in further education in health fields.

The Quest for Long-Term Outcomes

The ultimate goal of career programming is to improve wages and employment prospects in adulthood. Achieving this goal typically requires improving soft skills and occupation-specific skills through some combination of education, training, and experience—a challenging task, particularly with at-risk youth. One of the main difficulties OST programs face is engaging youth long enough to affect outcomes. Middle and high school youth often participate in other activities that make it difficult for them to participate consistently in OST programs. In addition, many youth leave afterschool programs because of boredom (Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001). It can be challenging for longer programs to keep youth engaged over time (Hirsch et al., 2011).

In response, directors may offer shorter programs. Indeed, although programs of varying length can engage youth, some of the most engaging programs we saw were shorter ones (Hynes et al., 2011). However, previous evaluations have suggested that generating long-term developmental effects may be difficult when youth participate for only a short time (Kauh, 2011). Even when programs achieve short-term positive outcomes, these effects sometimes fade out over time (Zaff & Smerdon, 2009).

Combining Engaging Experiences into Long-term Interventions

In our research, we saw several programs trying to overcome this dilemma by creatively using scaffolding, or a leveled sequence of learning experiences. Scaffolding is not a new idea. In academics, youth with sufficient competence progress from pre-calculus to calculus; in sports, they advance from junior varsity to varsity. Scaffolding has been promoted in the OST field as well. For instance, Halpern argues that we need to "create scaffolding for a coherent set of learning experiences, across time and place" to truly support youth development (Halpern, 2012, p. 98). Scaffolding has a strong theoretical basis in educational theory, career progression, and theory on vocational identity development. For instance, in education, research shows that students learn best when the material is challenging but not impossible, meeting youth at their current level and helping them reach the next level. Material that is too easy leads to boredom; material that is too hard leads to frustration (Clifford, 1990). A sequence of programs built one on top of the other al-

lows for an appropriate match between youths' skills and program content. Similarly, the career development field uses the idea of a career ladder, on which people move from one level to the next as they gain skills and experience. Research on vocational identity indicates that programming should help youth explore career choices, select a career path, and then pursue that path (Porfeli & Lee, 2012).

In our study, we saw several OST programs using scaffolding in creative ways. Within an organization, exploratory programs can be linked to higher-level, more intensive programs, so that students who are interested in continuing after a first set of experiences can see an immediate higher-level step to take. For instance, one program offered a fun three-day summer camp to spark interest in a field among a large group of high school students. Students who wanted to learn more could compete for admission into a more intensive school-year afterschool program. Another provider offered a series of programs, with each one building on the last, so students who wanted to stay involved had something new and more advanced to do each year. Students could eventually receive intensive training and return as paid staff leaders. In both programs, students who were not interested in learning more about the topic could pursue other interests. This kind of scaffolding may combine the appeal of shorter programs with the longer-term skill development and consistent relationships that are important for long-term effects.

As Halpern (2012) argues, scaffolding may occur across organizations as well as within organizations over time; adults working with youth can facilitate this process. Our research found that such connections across organizations are already happening in some areas. For instance, many OST programs take youth on college tours to expose them to post-secondary opportunities—a relatively easy way to build knowledge about possible next steps. For younger students, we saw a career exploration and science program that brought youth from various middle schools into a vocational high school for an intensive five-week afterschool program. These youth not only learned new skills but also got a chance to see the vocational school and meet a few teachers, providing them with better information as they thought about which high school to attend.

We saw other creative ideas for helping youth progress to the next level. For instance, youth may begin to explore a particular interest at an OST program and then "climb up" to the next opportunity, such as a summer job in that industry, funded through a workforce develop-

ment organization, or post-secondary schooling. One example was a career exploration program for juniors and seniors interested in skilled occupations. The program met once a month at different local businesses. Youth met people who worked at the business, learned about the available career paths, and did hands-on activities to see what the work was like. Many of the local businesses had apprenticeship programs. By the end of the year, interested youth knew who to contact, how much they would get paid, and how to apply to the next step. Through these mechanisms, the programs directly connected youth with an interest in learning more about a topic to a realistic, tangible next step. This kind of connection requires the links between the education, workforce development, and OST systems for which many advocate (e.g., Halpern, 2012). From a youth development perspective, it matters less which institution runs the next experience than whether youth find and engage in the next rung in the ladder.

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Teaching Youth to Transition to the Next Step on the Ladder

Our discussions with OST providers made it clear that many programs were already focusing on teaching youth the skills they need to succeed in careers. For these programs, career programming may not represent yet another new set of activities to add to the curriculum. Instead, these programs may simply need to ensure that youth understand, and can articulate, how the skills they are learning can help them in the future. For instance, a recent evaluation of the After School Matters Initiative in Chicago indicates that having skills is not enough; youth have to understand, and be able to communicate, how the skills they learn will transfer to the workplace. Unfortunately, the evaluators found that many youth either did not know that skills they developed in afterschool programs "counted" as work skills or could not explain how those skills would help them in the workplace (Alexander & Hirsch, 2012).

OST programs need to be sure youth understand what *transferable skills* are and to clearly articulate how the skills developed in the program will help them succeed in the next step on the ladder. Many of the programs we observed were organized around a substantive area, such as urban farming, technology, or entrepreneurship. Program directors talked about teaching youth not only substantive skills but also critical transferable skills identified in the SCANS report (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991), such as communication, problem solving, and teamwork. When applying for jobs, post-secondary education, or other training, youth have to be able to communicate how their experiences have given them the skills and knowledge to be successful. As the After School Matters evaluation showed, explicitly teaching youth to articulate what they have learned may be an important component of youth programming (Alexander & Hirsch, 2012).

The Need and the Opportunity

There is a clear need to do more to support youth as they move through school and into the labor market. OST programs can play an important role in this effort. Career-related activities and opportunities appear to be appealing to some youth. In addition, career programming fits nicely with the philosophy of many OST providers, as it can readily incorporate best practices including opportunities to build new skills, interact with the real world, lead, and make decisions. Indeed, many programs are already engaging youth in career-related activities.

However, improving career outcomes for low-income youth will be challenging. More research is necessary to help us understand which program models have the greatest effects, and on which youth. One fruitful strategy is to bring together schools, workforce development, OST programs, and funders to share resources, identify gaps in services, and build educational ladders that youth can use to develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the labor market.

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