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Best Practices to Enhance the Employability of Opportunity Youth:
A Synthesis of the Available Literature

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INTRODUCTION: Defining Opportunity Youth

In the United States, millions of young people lack the necessary experience and skills to succeed in the labor market. This employment skills gap affects non-white youth at disproportionate rates compared to their white counterparts (Urban Alliance, 2014). Nationally, an estimated 3 million people between the ages of 16 and 24 are neither in school or working, with blacks and Latinos being 3-to-6 times more likely to fall into this category (Svajlenka, 2016).

An analysis of Census data reveals that the City of Albany has approximately 1000 youth neither in school nor employed, with the highest proportion in West Hill, Arbor Hill, and the South End (See Table 1). About 85% of these youth are between the ages of 20 and 24. Two thirds are racial minorities, and eleven percent of black youth are unemployed and not in school compared to two percent of white youth (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015).

TABLE 1. Demographics of Opportunity Youth in Albany

Demographic		Percent
Age	16-19	13%
	20-24	87%
Race	Black	49%
	White	33%
	Asian	12%
	Multiracial	6%

Youth unemployment has collateral consequences on the affected youth, the economy, and society in general. Youth unemployment is a predictor of future negative outcomes including long-term unemployment, poverty, criminal behavior, and substance abuse (Svajlenka, 2016). According to an Urban Alliance policy brief, "each young person who disconnects from school or work costs an estimated $704,020 over his or her lifetime in lost earnings, lower economic growth, lower tax revenues, and higher government spending. For all disconnected youth in this country, the aggregate taxpayer burden is $1.56 trillion and the social cost is $4.75 trillion" (Urban Alliance, 2014). Youth employability initiatives have been devised as one mechanism for mitigating this issue and attempting to close the employment skills gap.

Identifying Best Practices in Youth Employment Programs

Incorporating best practices in program models is critical because these practices have been shown through research and experience to produce optimal results. However, identifying the best practice components to inform new program development is complicated as youth employment initiatives vary significantly in the population they serve and the services they offer. Drawing from the National Youth Employment Coalition's Effective Practices Criteria Workbook, review articles, and information from youth employment program models, Collura (2010) identified ten effective programmatic practices that are consistently present in the most successful youth employment programs. Data for the present review were collected by consulting similar sources, analyzing existing program models, and interviewing experts in the field. Results from this review provide support for Collura's (2010) findings. This review discusses and expands upon these findings.

The best practices discussed in this review are intended only to provide a general framework. As will be discussed, youth employment programs models and the best practices they employ are highly dependent on the individual needs of the initiative's participants. That being said, some or all of the following best practices are consistently present in successful youth employment program models.

1 BEST PRACTICE: Specify an Explicit Target Population and Program Goals

Effective programs will have a clearly defined mission that specifies the population of youth that the program is targeting, the outcomes the program aspires to achieve, and the specific strategies that the program will implement to attain these outcomes (Collura, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2000; Weinbaum & Wirmusky, 1994). There is no single "best model" for effective youth employment programs, as practices will vary based on the target population. Accordingly, effective programs do not attempt to serve everyone, and instead recruit and select participants that are most likely to benefit from the program (O'Sullivan, 2000). Goals of youth employment programs will differ based on their target population. While all youth employment programs share the common goal of increasing the employability of its participants, some will place more of an emphasis on educational attainment and others on vocational training (Jekielek, Cochran, & Hair, 2002). For example, a program that is targeting youth who have dropped out of school will likely include an educational component such as a GED program, whereas, programs that target youth who are currently enrolled in high school may focus more on vocational skills. It is critical that "there is a logical relationship between the initiative's mission, activities, and the youth it serves" (O'Sullivan, 2000, p. 20). Most programs will thus find it useful to develop a logic model connecting its strategies and desired outcomes.

2 BEST PRACTICE: Focus on Employability Skills

The Entry-Level Job Requirement survey conducted by the Seattle Jobs Initiative asks employers about what skills they value and expect job applicants to possess for entry-level positions. Results suggest that the majority (77%) of employers believe that soft skills, such as time management, teamwork, and professional communication, are as or more important than technical skills for securing entry-level employment at their companies. Furthermore, employers stated that they were hesitant or unwilling to hire candidates that lack soft skills, with 87.8% of respondents indicating that they assess the soft skills of applicants by observing how they conduct themselves during a job interview (Pritchard, 2013). There is often a gap between the skills required to successfully navigate the labor market and the skills that are taught in schools (Kim, 2015). Effective youth employment programs should seek to fill this gap, and in order to accomplish this, they must have a sophisticated understanding of the specific competencies that employers in the present labor market are seeking.

The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) and Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) can be valuable resources for developing this understanding. SCANS membership was appointed by the Secretary of Labor to determine the specific skills young people needed to succeed in the workplace. In 1991, the commission released their report, What Work Requires of Schools, providing a general framework of employability skills (The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991) (See Table 2). While a useful resource, a limitation of SCANS is that the framework lacks specificity (Collura, 2010).

TABLE 2: SCAN'S THREE-PART FOUNDATION

BASIC SKILLS: Reads, writes, performs arithmetic and mathematical operations, listens and speaks

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

THINKING SKILLS: Thinks creatively, makes decisions, solves problems, visualizes, knows how to learn, and reasons

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

PERSONAL QUALITIES: Displays responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, and integrity and honesty

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

Source: The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991

JAG provides a more detailed framework. The JAG National High School Employability Skills Curriculum consists of 81 specific competencies broken down into eight categories: career development, job attainment, job survival, basic competencies, leadership and self-development, personal skills, life survival skills, and workplace competencies (JAG Annual Report, 2015) (see Table 3). Neither of the aforementioned resources are exhaustive and are only intended to provide a basic framework for understanding the skills that youth employment programs may want to be teaching their participants.

TABLE 3: JAG NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM FOR COMPETENCY-BASED EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

National High School Curriculum

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

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

C. Job Survival Competencies
C.14 Demonstrate appropriate appearance
C.15 Understand what employers expect of employees
C.16 Identify problems of new employees
C.17 Demonstrate time management
C.18 Follow directions
C.19 Practice effective human relations
C.20 Appropriately resign from a job

D. Basic Competencies
D.21 Comprehend verbal communications
D.22 Comprehend written communications
D.23 Communicate in writing
D.24 Communicate verbally
D.25 Perform mathematical calculations

E. Leadership and Self Development Competencies
E.26 Demonstrate team membership
E.27 Demonstrate team leadership
E.28 Deliver presentations to a group
E.29 Compete successfully with peers
E.30 Demonstrate commitment to an organization

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

G. Life Survival Skills
G.38 Evaluate a career plan to determine appropriate postsecondary educational options
G.39 Identify how best to achieve marketable occupation skills for an entry level job
G.40 Conduct a job analysis
G.41 Apply critical thinking skills
G.42 Demonstrate effective study skills
G.43 Demonstrate how to use group dynamics techniques
G.44 Explain the roles and function of a value-added organization

G.45 Understand the essential elements of high performing work teams
G.46 Describe how to work and communicate with diverse people at work and in the community to satisfy their expectations
G.47 Demonstrate techniques for building commitment by others
G.48 Demonstrate an openness to change
G.49 Provide constructive feedback
G.50 Negotiate solutions to conflicts
G.51 Demonstrate politeness and civility
G.52 Demonstrate an ability to adapt to people and situations
G.53 Exhibit work ethics and behaviors essential to success
G.54 Set and prioritize goals and establish a timeline for achieving them
G.55 Apply the problem solving process to complex problems
G.56 Demonstrate an ability to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of self and others
G.57 Design and justify solutions by tracking and evaluating results
G.58 Identify ways to build mutual trust and respect
G.59 Prepare a short- and long-term personal budget

H. Workplace Competencies
H.60 Demonstrate punctuality and good attendance practices
H.61 Demonstrate initiative and proactivity
H.62 Demonstrate how to work effectively with others
H.63 Demonstrate an attitude that attracts the attention of management
H.64 Demonstrate an ability to communicate and work with customers to satisfy their expectations
H.65 Demonstrate listening skills which will result in gaining a clear understanding of information being conveyed
H.66 Demonstrate an ability to follow and give directions
H.67 Demonstrate good reasoning skills which results in thinking first, then taking action
H.68 Demonstrate integrity and honesty in dealings with internal and external customers
H.69 Demonstrate a willingness to accept responsibility for one's own actions
H.70 Demonstrate a commitment in completing work assignments accurately and in a timely fashion
H.71 Demonstrate an ability to satisfy the purposes of a delegated task
H.72 Demonstrate an ability to prioritize and manage time effectively in the workplace
H.73 Demonstrate enthusiasm for work
H.74 Demonstrate an eagerness to learn new responsibilities or improve current responsibilities
H.75 Demonstrate an understanding of the work to be accomplished
H.76 Demonstrate familiarity with a variety of technologies
H.77 Demonstrate an ability to self-evaluate and develop a continuous improvement (career development) plan
H.78 Demonstrate basic computer operation skills
H.79 Demonstrate an ability to learn from past experiences and others
H.80 Demonstrate an ability to send, receive and organize e-mail messages
H.81 Demonstrate an ability to search for information on the Internet

Source: JAG Annual Report, 2015

3 BEST PRACTICE: Provide Comprehensive Services

Effective programs take a holistic approach to preparing youth for the workplace. Programs focus on a multitude of competencies and offer a variety of services. In addition to employability training, initiatives may also offer mental health and substance abuse services, educational training, healthcare, and logistical services such as help with transportation or childcare (Collura, 2010). The services offered should be dependent on the individual needs of the initiative's participants and the initiative's desired outcomes.

Job Corps is one example of a comprehensive program. The Job Corps model is an intensive program for opportunity youth that in addition to employability training provides education and GED training, health and mental health services, and social skills training. It is unique in that it contains a residential component (U.S. DOL, 2014). The target group for this program is "economically disadvantaged youth in need of additional education" (Collura, 2010, p. 3).

4 BEST PRACTICE: Promote Positive Youth Development

Youth development "encompasses the formal and informal ways that initiatives engage youth and encourage positive growth and development" (O'Sullivan, 2000, p. 24). Effective programs recognize that youth vary in their growth and maturity and are developing physically and emotionally. It is important that these youth feel that they are valued and that the program provides an environment that simultaneously feels safe, fun, and challenging (O'Sullivan, 2000). Collura (2010) identifies three basic tenets that effective youth employment programs employ:

- youth are resources to be valued and should not be viewed simply as recipients of service
- youth should be included in program decision making and be viewed as partners
- the program focuses on relationships and processes.

Table 4 highlights additional approaches for promoting positive youth development.

TABLE 4: POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH (COLLURA, 2010)

Encourage Strong Youth/Adult Relationships — Research continuously recognizes that sustained relationships with caring, knowledgeable adults are important for the healthy development of young people (Buschmann & Haimson, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2000). Caring adults are critical for gaining a young person's trust and commitment to a program. Such adults may be mentors, teachers, counselors, program directors, employers or community members.

Build Youths' Responsibility and Leadership Skills — Effective initiatives acknowledge that youth are capable of actively contributing to their environment and should be involved in decision-making processes (Weinbaum & Wirmusky, 1994). The rationale for this is simple: when youth are involved in decision-making processes, they can become resources for creating the kinds of settings that promote positive development for themselves and others.

Create Opportunities that are Age/Stage Appropriate — Effective youth programs acknowledge the distinct needs of young people and create opportunities that are age and stage appropriate. For example, less mature youth may not be ready for a job and may benefit from in-program activities, but older youth may be ready to take on an outside internship or work experience (O'Sullivan, 2000).

Build a Sense of Self and Group — Effective initiatives help young people develop a positive image of who they are. In order to do this, programs may work to increase young people's life skills, provide youth with opportunities to showcase their work and skills, use journals, and engage in self-reflection (O'Sullivan, 2000). In addition to helping participants develop their personal identity, youth need to form attachments to larger groups (O'Sullivan, 2000). Peer groups and peer support increase youth's attachment to a program or organization.

YouthBuild is one example of a career-based program that promotes positive youth development (Collura, 2010). In this program, economically disadvantaged youth work to obtain their high school degree or GED while building affordable homes in their communities (U.S. DOL, 2014). To promote leadership, participants in the program provide input to organization leadership, make meaningful decisions about the organization's policies, projects, and activities, and even serve on the national YouthBuild board of directors (Collura, 2010).

5 BEST PRACTICE: Employ and Retain Quality Staff

A key characteristic of model youth employment programs is that they recruit and retain quality staff who effectively work with opportunity youth and provide them the tools necessary for increasing their employability (Weinbaum & Wirmusky, 1994). It can be especially valuable to employ staff with strong connections to the community and local employers (Collura, 2010). Model programs have minimal staff turnover and employ a range of professionals including support staff, teachers, counselors, and vocational professionals (Weinbaum & Wirmusky, 1994). The types of staff an initiative employs will be dependent on the services being offered. If the initiative includes an educational component, certified teachers would likely be the ideal employees to handle tasks in this area. Recruiting and retaining quality staff requires programs to offer competitive pay, which can be challenging for initiatives operating with budgetary constraints (Weinbaum & Wirmusky, 1994). Initiatives should have diverse funding sources, keep current and potential funders informed on program successes, and consistently seek out additional resources for funding (O'Sullivan, 2000).

6 BEST PRACTICE: Provide Follow-Up Services

Youth commonly rotate through numerous jobs and it is often not until their late twenties that they settle into a more permanent position (O'Sullivan, 2000). As youth move from job to job, it is often not obvious to the youth that the skills and competencies gained at one job or in one industry can help them succeed and advance at a new job. However, "when guided, young people can use each job as a bridge to the next and build an ever-broadening set of skills and competencies that contributes to their career preparation" (O'Sullivan, 2000, p. 30). This is often accomplished through follow-up services. Effective programs offer follow-up services lasting at least one year after completion of the program (O'Sullivan, 2000). For example, the JAG model provides 12 months of follow-up services after participants complete their GED (Collura, 2010). JAG supports graduates in obtaining "entry-level employment, military service, and/or postsecondary enrollment that lead to career advancement opportunities" (JAG Annual Report, 2015). Another example of follow-up services is the YouthBuild Alumni Association that allows participants who have completed the program to remain connected to the program and participate in some capacity for up to four years (Collura, 2010).

7 BEST PRACTICE: Intervene Early

National youth employment programs typically target youth between the ages of 16 to 24. However, research suggests that for at-risk youth, programs may be more effective if they reach the youth at a younger age (Collura, 2010; Jekielek et al., 2002). Thus, if the target population for an initiative is youth between the ages of 16 and 24, the initiative should aim to intervene at

16 whenever possible. Some initiatives have taken early intervention a step further by adopting "Cradle-to-Career" models where initial interventions occur as early as infancy (Theory of Action, 2017). Initiatives should strive to reach youth as early as possible to ensure the most effective intervention possible.

8 · BEST PRACTICE: Provide Youth with Financial Incentives and Focus on Increasing Financial Capability

Effective youth employment programs offer financial incentives for its participants. Such incentives may include hourly pay, allowances, or money for college (Buschmann & Haimson, 2008; Collura, 2010). In addition to simply incentivizing participation, offering youth financial incentives provides critical teachable moments, such as when a youth gets their first paycheck. Initiatives can use these opportunities to help youth increase their financial capability (Loke, Choi, & Libby, 2015). One example of a program that works in conjunction with existing workforce programs to increase youth financial capability is the MyPath Savings Initiative.

MyPath Savings integrates key financial capability components into workforce programs by offering youth access to mainstream financial products, assisting them with opening up checking and savings accounts, setting up direct deposits, offering financial education, setting goals, and providing savings incentives. MyPath offers workforce programs training and technical assistance so that they can integrate these components into their existing model (MyPath Savings, n.d.). Results from an extensive evaluation of the MyPath Savings Initiative were promising. Youth in the study who participated in MyPath Savings experienced significant increases in financial knowledge, financial self-efficacy, and made positive financial decisions more frequently. These findings were supported for youth of all demographics (Loke et al., 2015).

9 · BEST PRACTICE: Document Evidence of Success

Funders will want to know if their investment in a youth employment program is having a meaningful impact on the target population (O'Sullivan, 2000). With the goal of many youth employment programs focusing on youth development principles, simply measuring the job placement rate of participants is not sufficient. Instead, programs should document competencies gained by individuals, including both "soft skills" and "hard skills" (Collura, 2010). Effective initiatives use a variety of approaches to document competencies gained by participants and to help determine effectiveness. One framework is to place measures and data into three categories: (1) descriptive data, (2) outcome data, and (3) comparative data (O'Sullivan, 2000).

Descriptive data are information collected about the target population being served and services being offered. Outcome data refers to measurable objectives that reflect the program goals. Outcome measures and data can include educational and competencies, employment gains, youth and stakeholder satisfaction, and youth development effects.

Initiatives use comparative measures and data to measure impacts or effectiveness against a comparable initiative with a similar target population (O'Sullivan, 2000). This allows outcomes (such as employment gains) to be attributed specifically to the program and not to some other

factor such as a new industry coming to the community. In an effort to ensure unbiased and credible results, successful programs commonly bring in an outside evaluator with knowledge of the program area or partner with a local college or research center to handle data and evaluations. Funders may be willing to help finance such a study if they are convinced it will be executed by an independent organization and that results will be credible (O'Sullivan, 2000). While initiatives may find the aforementioned framework to be useful, there is no single protocol for how competencies should be measured or documented.

10 BEST PRACTICE: Embrace Continuous Improvement

Successful youth employment programs are constantly striving to improve and achieve higher levels of performance. Effective programs collect and analyze data to provide them with research-driven, actionable insights that are used for planning, managing, and improving operations (O'Sullivan, 2000). Feedback from various stakeholders including youth participants, funders, staff, and others can be used for improvement purposes (Collura, 2010).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Millions of youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are disconnected from both work and school. Youth that fall into this category are far more likely to experience a range of negative outcomes which have severe and negative implications for the affected youths, the economy, and society in general (Svajlenka, 2016). One response to this issue has been the creation of initiatives that aim to increase the employability of opportunity youth.

When beginning any successful initiative, it is important to investigate best practices that have been shown through research and experience to produce optimal results. This review concurs with and expands upon prior literature identifying ten best practices that are consistently present in successful program models Collura (2010). Limitations of this research include that the available literature and sophisticated evidence on outcomes associated with youth employment programs is scant. What is unequivocally clear is that millions of youth are in need of adequate employability training that will effectively enable them to successfully navigate today's ever demanding labor market. The best practices outlined in this review may provide a general framework that can be included in a custom crafted program model that meets the individual needs of the youth in which the initiative intends to serve.

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About the Center for Human Services Research

The Center for Human Services Research (CHSR) is a research department within the School of Social Welfare at the University at Albany. CHSR has over 20 years of experience conducting evaluation research, designing information systems and informing program and policy development for a broad range of agencies serving vulnerable populations. Rigorous research and evaluation methods, strong relationships with project partners, and timely, accurate and objective information are hallmarks of CHSR's work. For more information about CHSR please visit www.albany.edu/chsr.

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