

# Engaging Youth in Career Programming During Out-of-School Time:

*Lessons for Program Design from a Study  
of Experienced Out-of-School Time Programs*

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**For:**

Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development Network

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The Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development Network (PSAYDN) is working to promote sustainable high quality out-of-school time programs through advocacy and capacity-building in order to support successful transitions to adulthood for all of Pennsylvania's youth.

Network members include leaders from the United Way, Pennsylvania Department of Education, Cooperative Extension, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, PA Keys, the YMCA, the Boys & Girls Clubs, PENN SACCA and many other organizations from across the Commonwealth.

# Project Background

There is considerable interest in career programming for youth. Major initiatives highlight the need for schools and communities to work together to support youths' career readiness during in-school and out-of-school time (OST), including the Forum for Youth Investment's *Ready by 21* initiative and the Mott Foundation's *New Day for Learning*. The Obama administration has also stressed the importance of aligning education standards with career readiness. Research on recruiting and retaining youth into out-of-school time programs indicates that youth may be interested in career-related activities as well.<sup>i</sup>

## What is career programming?

*Career programming* is any systematic effort to expose youth to the world of work and teach them the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in it. Career programming can include career exploration and interest assessment, job search skills, supervised work experience, and learning occupation-specific skills like construction or engineering.

## Why might youth find career programming engaging?

Researchers are identifying the characteristics of quality out-of-school time programs that middle and high school youth find engaging. These include leadership opportunities, autonomy and decision-making, individualized mentoring, hands-on active learning, experiences in the real world, opportunities to belong, support for efficacy and mattering, and opportunities for skill building.<sup>ii</sup> High-quality career programming will often include many of these components by helping youth explore careers in the real world, teaching them occupation-specific skills, and offering them opportunities to use those skills in their communities.

## Important Cautionary Note

While supporting youths' career development is exciting for many reasons, programs need to recognize that improving long-term career outcomes is challenging. Even sophisticated job training programs have often not improved long-term outcomes related to employment and education.<sup>iii</sup> In the OST literature, the recent evaluation of the Afterschool Matters initiative in Chicago showed that while participation in an apprenticeship was associated with higher reports of self-regulation and slower increases in problem behavior, participation was not associated with increased earnings or education.<sup>iv</sup> Research to date has not adequately explained why some programs work and others do not,<sup>v</sup> but issues such as inadequate staffing and training, short duration programming, and difficulty replicating promising models appear salient.<sup>vi</sup> When programs do seem promising, they often include many different activities, and evaluations have yielded little information about *which* activities are most important.<sup>vii</sup> This does not mean OST programs should avoid career programming. But programs need to be careful about what they promise. Success is more likely if schools, OST programs, and workforce development coordinate efforts in ways that will collectively improve long-term outcomes for youth.<sup>viii</sup>

### Design Recommendation

*Be sure your career-related activities include:*

Hands-on learning

Exposure to the real world

Learning and mastering new skills

Opportunities for youth to make meaningful decisions and learn from mistakes

Opportunities to make a real difference in their community

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## Study Overview

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While there is considerable interest in finding ways for OST programs to support youths' career development, there is little research on career programming that addresses the unique needs and circumstances of OST programs. This study was designed to answer three questions:

1. What kinds of activities and opportunities are OST programs providing to support youths' career development?
2. Which career-related programs and activities do youth find most engaging?
3. What are the main barriers to successful career programming in OST? And what creative solutions have experienced programs used to overcome those barriers?

To answer these questions, a detailed study of 26 out-of-school time programs in Pennsylvania was conducted. Because the goal was to learn from experienced providers and share those lessons, leaders in the field were asked to help identify programs that offer career-related activities and have a strong reputation for offering quality programming. All of the programs served primarily low-income or high-risk students in middle or high school. Because understanding the diversity of programming being offered was of interest, programs with different content, in different kinds of communities (urban/rural), funded through different sources (public/private), and structured differently (school-year/summer, short duration/long) were intentionally included.

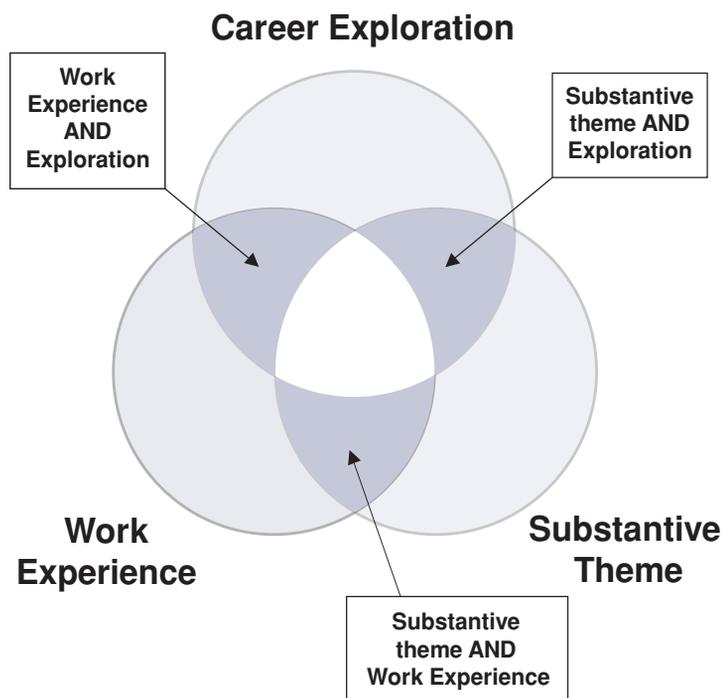
At each program, detailed information was collected to answer study questions. During hour-long interviews, program directors shared program goals, activities, challenges and creative solutions. Through afternoon or day-long site visits, trained observers collected data on activity content, instructional strategies, relationships between staff and youth, youth engagement, and attendance. Youth at each program completed 15-minute surveys about their engagement in the program and their participation in various activities. (More detail about the study methodology is available in the Appendix).

It is important to note that this study was not designed to assess program *effectiveness*. While the sample includes some promising programs, these programs have not been evaluated for whether they have positive impacts on youth outcomes. Instead, the results of this study focus on the characteristics of programs that *engage* youth. Recruiting, retaining and engaging youth is a well-known challenge and is a necessary step toward building effective programs.<sup>ix</sup>

This guide uses findings from the study to answer the questions posed above. To make the findings useful to a wide audience, findings are connected to questions about program design. To share the many good ideas that were demonstrated, descriptions of promising programs are included and real programs' strategies for overcoming barriers are highlighted. To provide the most useful information possible, these findings are supplemented with research from the fields of education, adolescent development, workforce development and youth programs. In many places, challenging questions that remain unanswered are highlighted. PSAYDN and its research partners hope this guide will be useful to people who want to design or improve career-related programming for youth during out- of-school time.

## How is Career Programming Done?

The first goal was to understand how career programming was being done in OST programs. Based on interviews with program directors and observations of programs, there appear to be three distinct types of career programming: career exploration, work experiences and substantive theme programming. As the figure below shows, programs can engage in just one type of programming, but many programs engage in more than one type. From a program design perspective, thinking about these different types of programming separately is useful because each poses distinct challenges and requires different resources to implement. Understanding the challenges and resources necessary for each type of programming can help programs decide which type (or types) of career programming they can offer.



Below each type of programming and one engaging program from the sample are described. Throughout the guide, content refers back to these programs to show how they have engaged youth or creatively overcome common barriers.

**Career exploration** opportunities teach youth about available careers and the skills, education and experiences needed to enter those careers. They often encourage youth to explore

### Industry Clubs

Each year over 200 middle school youth participate in *Industry Clubs* supported by the Northwest PA Workforce Investment Board. Clubs have 10-25 students per school and meet for 2 hours per week during the spring semester. Youth do interest assessments, go on field trips, and have guest speakers come in to teach them about careers available in their own communities. At the end of the program, all of the clubs come together for a Career Expo to share what they have learned and participate in fun, hands-on learning activities.

their own skills and interests in order to match those with potential career paths.

There are many relatively straightforward career exploration activities. Some programs use computer software to help youth identify their skills and interests, and use their answers to identify potential careers. Other programs highlight career opportunities in particular fields by bringing in guest speakers or taking youth on field trips to local worksites. These career exploration activities can be stand-alone units or they can be part of other career-related programming.

**Actual work experiences** provide youth with hands-on opportunities to work, and for older youth, to earn money. Some programs work with local businesses to place youth in appropriate entry-level jobs. Other programs hire youth to work at their organization doing clerical work, assisting staff with younger children, or supporting other community initiatives run by the organization. Some programs are even industry led, emerging from a desire to ensure a steady pipeline of workers in the future. Programs sometimes combine the paid work experience with a work readiness unit to teach professional behavior and expectations; others include a unit to help youth find and access paid work including resume writing, interviewing and job search skills. Finally, some programs focus on a substantive theme and pay youth to work on projects related to the theme (see next page).

# Engaging Youth in Career Programming

**Substantive theme programs** provide youth with knowledge and skills related to a specific topic. Some themes link to a specific occupation, such as learning skills and knowledge necessary for cosmetology or construction, whereas others focus on a broader substantive topic like urban farming, technology or the arts. In these broader programs, youth learn content knowledge and skills that could help them in a variety of occupations. Many substantive programs use project-based learning in an effort to teach youth the softer skills that employers consistently say the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce needs like problem solving, teamwork and communication.

## Bethlehem Partnership for a Healthy Community

The *Bethlehem Partnership for a Healthy Community* initiative runs a two-year program for at-risk and immigrant high school students that trains youth for health careers in order to diversify their workforce. Youth participate in classroom work readiness training prior to and during their work experience. Youth are placed in jobs in different departments of the hospital, where they perform necessary – but age-appropriate – tasks under the supervision of professionals. Students work in the emergency room, neonatal intensive care unit, pharmacy, CAT scan lab, and other departments.

Many programs engage in more than one type of career programming. For instance, many substantive theme programs have significant career exploration activities in order to help youth understand how their skills and interests can lead them to productive careers.

## Techno Teens

*Techno Teens* turns youths' love of video games into an opportunity. Youth learn computer skills, problem-solving and communication while working in teams to create their own video games. The program shows youth where their skills and interests can lead by teaching about the gaming business, including marketing and product development, and by using field trips to expose them to a variety of jobs that require technology skills and creativity.

The second goal of the study was to understand which career-related programs and activities youth found most engaging.

## Creating Engaging Programs

Programs need to be able not just to engage youth, but to engage them in productive activities that are likely to improve their long-term outcomes. Each program in the study was scored on their ability to engage youth in activities that were likely to improve their career readiness (see Appendix for details). This section describes findings about the characteristics that did – and did not – distinguish the most engaging programs from those that were less engaging. Each finding is linked to program design considerations.

**Choose the type of programming you will do based on the needs of youth in your community and the resources you have available.** Programs doing career exploration, work experiences, and substantive themes were all able to engage youth in productive activities. The type of programming selected was less important for engaging youth in productive activities than *how* the program was implemented.

**Identify a “tight” program focus and stick to it.** Programs with the highest scores were more likely to have a very “tight” focus. The tight focus can come from selecting a specific final product to work toward, like at *Techno Teens* where youth were creating video games, or the tight focus can be on teaching a specific skill set. One program took a broad topic–entrepreneurship – and made it tight by gearing all activities toward teaching youth how to present themselves and their businesses. Logical activities around public speaking, advertising, and networking followed. This tight focus may help programs for two reasons. First, youth know what they are getting when they sign up, ensuring that they join activities that interest them. Second, this tight focus may make it easier for staff to decide which activities to include and to spend the most time on. In this study, when programs had too many objectives or too many components, it was harder for them to build up momentum and keep youth engaged.

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# Engaging Youth in Career Programming (cont.)

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**Think carefully about program timing and duration.** This study certainly saw full-year afterschool programs that were engaging youth in productive activities, but a disproportionate number of the most engaging programs were summer programs or afterschool programs lasting only a few months. Similarly, in the evaluation of the Afterschool Matters initiative in Chicago, staff had more difficulty engaging youth the longer they participated because it was challenging to come up with multiple meaningful activities or projects.<sup>x</sup> OST providers may want to think carefully about when to offer their programs (school year or summer), how many days, weeks or months the program should be, and how intensive it should be (hours per week).

This study cannot give clear guidance about the optimal program length; it can simply raise the question of program duration. Discussions about program duration are complicated. For instance, short programs may have some advantages. They can run on timelines similar to other extracurricular activities like sports, thereby reducing conflict between competing activities. They may benefit from the excitement of a new activity at the beginning, and then use the incentive of a final product to maintain participation, much like sports or school plays do. Summer programs often have several days in a row with long-blocks of time for project-based learning and as such, may be able to spend less time reviewing old material and move right into the day's work. But short programs may have limitations as well. Decades of research shows that youth need long-term mentoring relationships and stability for healthy development,<sup>xi</sup> and youth engaged only in disconnected short programs may not get that stability. In addition, when trying to change difficult long-term outcomes, short programs may be at a distinct disadvantage. On a systems-level, the OST field may want to consider whether there are innovative ways to combine the excitement of shorter programs with the benefits of longer programs. Models to look at may include athletic programs where short-term programs scaffold onto each other, and organizations offering a series of programs that youth can move through as their skills improve.

**If you run a substantive program for high school students, be sure at least one of the lead staff members has considerable substantive knowledge.** The substantive programs that were best at engaging youth in productive activities had a staff person or subcontractor with considerable content knowledge. This person was often leading a significant percentage of the activities and was deeply involved in decisions about how the program would be structured and how the content would be delivered. When programs had less substantive expertise to draw from, gave their substantive experts less control over program design and implementation, or exposed youth to these experts for less time, engagement scores were often lower. Just as there are major efforts to ensure that high school teachers have sufficient substantive expertise,<sup>xii</sup> OST programs should make finding substantive experts a priority as well.

**It is possible to run an engaging program without paying youth to participate.** Youth love to get paid and many directors reported that wages or cash incentives improved recruitment and participation. Still it is important to note that several of the most engaging programs in the study were not using cash as an incentive.

## Creating Engaging Activities

When research staff visited programs, they often observed several different activities over the course of a day. Information about the activity content, the instructional strategies used, the quality of the relationships in the program, and youth engagement was recorded. Even *within* programs, there was variation in how engaging activities were. This activity-level data was used to identify the characteristics of activities that were most engaging.

The most engaging activities observed were well organized with clear learning goals, solid lesson plans and ample materials. In addition, engaging activities had challenging content, included hands-on components and allowed sufficient time for the completion of the activity. Even within programs, the most engaging activities were delivered by staff with the instructional

# Engaging Youth in Career Programming (cont.)

skills and substantive knowledge to do a successful job. These findings are in line with education research on effective teaching strategies. ‘Good’ teachers present materials in small amounts at a time, giving youth opportunities for hands-on practice after each step. In addition, good teachers regularly check for youth understanding, and provide consistent feed-back to youth to help guide them until they have mastered a task.<sup>xiii</sup> Programs may want to consider offering training on lesson planning and instructional strategies to staff that need help in this area.

## What Youth Say They Like

At each program, youth in attendance during the observation day were asked to complete a short survey. Many of the program youth came from low-income neighborhoods, but it is important to keep in mind that these were youth who *chose* to attend OST programs. These findings may not apply to youth with different motivations and backgrounds.

**Clearly show youth the connection between what they are doing and careers.** Youth were asked several questions about whether they were learning things at the program that would help them get a good job. Youth who gave high scores to these career items also gave high scores to items asking if they enjoyed the program and thought the activities were important. While these are just simple correlations, they lend additional support to the literature suggesting that youth are interested in career-related activities.<sup>xiv</sup> Some programs try to slide career lessons in without youth noticing, just as programs might try to embed practicing math skills in a more engaging project.

But the findings indicate that programs may want to very clearly show youth how the activities and opportunities will help them prepare for careers.

At the end of the youth survey, a series of questions were asked about the kinds of career-related activities youth had participated in at the program. If they had done a particular activity, they were asked how glad they were to have done it. If they had not done the activity, they were asked if they wanted to do it this year. As the table shows, youth ratings of these career activities were very high. The vast majority of youth who had been paid to work at the program, placed in an internship, or placed in a paid job were very glad they had done this (79 percent and 71 percent). More than half of the youth who did not have a work experience definitely wanted one.

Interestingly, 75 percent of youth who tutored, helped or taught younger children were very glad to have done this. In interviews, staff discussed how helping younger children allowed youth to display their new skills and give back to the community in ways that promoted efficacy and mattering. The benefits of working with younger children also have been recognized in the education field.<sup>xv</sup> But those benefits will only occur if the experience is well-designed, with clear learning objectives for older and younger youth. To achieve this, some programs have scaffolding within their program where youth begin in smaller roles then gradually move into more responsible roles working with younger children. This provides opportunities to train the youth, while giving them something to work toward.

Among youth who:	did this activity		did not do this activity	
	Percent very glad to have done it	N	Percent definitely wanting to	N
Paid to work at the program	79%	222	63%	164
Tutored, helped or taught younger children	75%	151	40%	235
Placed in internship or paid job	71%	180	54%	198
Did activities to learn what jobs match my skills and interests	62%	277	49%	106
Matched with an adult mentor (who did not work at the program)	58%	120	21%	257

# Applying Research to Program Design

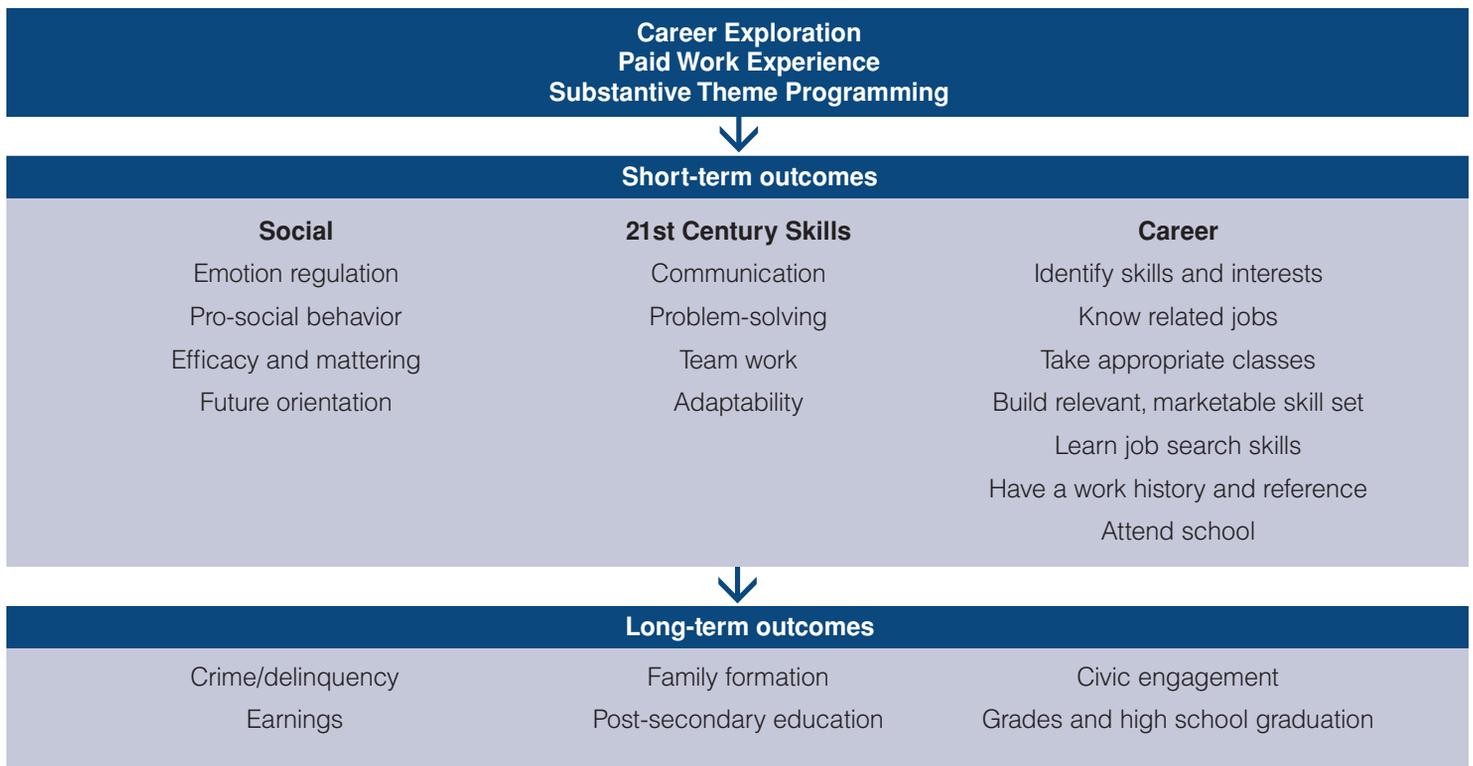
## Considerations for Program Design

The next section of the guide raises several challenging questions that emerged from the study of career programming. This section brings in the broader literature on youth programming and education to raise two program design issues for consideration. The background and discussion raised in this section of the guide provide an important context for the findings presented in the next section.

**Select program outcomes first.** While the study focused on youth engagement, as research staff observed programs, they became very interested in the different kinds of outcomes that different types of career programming might be impacting. Outcomes are often proscribed by funders, and as more programs provide career programming they may face pressure to show impacts on long-term outcomes such as earnings, grades and high school graduation rates.

As the figure below highlights, there are many *short-term outcomes* that are important stepping-stones on the way to improving long-term outcomes.<sup>xvi</sup> Carefully selecting short-

term outcomes may help programs in three ways. Education research clearly points to the importance of first identifying learning objectives, then developing lesson plans designed to reach those objectives. Having a reasonable number of short-term outcomes may help programs develop a tight focus around specific learning objectives, providing staff and youth with clear goals. A focus on short-term outcomes also makes clear the importance of improving social and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, which plays to the strengths of many youth programs. Finally, improving these meaningful short-term outcomes may be more realistic given the amount of time OST programs – particularly shorter programs – spend working with youth. Schools and job training programs have had difficulty improving some of these long-term outcomes, even with extensive programming.<sup>xvii</sup> Cumulatively, schools and OST programs need to be focused on improving these long-term outcomes, but focusing on short-term outcomes may help OST providers design tight programs and track their contribution to youth’s longer-term progress.



## Applying Research to Program Design (cont.)

**What role does content really play?** Content can play a major role in engaging youth, but programs have to find content that *really* motivates them. For high school youth in particular, they have to find ways to bring in content experts who can teach youth advanced material and marketable skills. For example, *Techno Teens* started with the fact that kids love video games. The program brought in a computer expert and taught youth the computer skills necessary to design their own games. A distinct task like designing video games gave them a tight focus and the computer expert brought substantive expertise. They taught youth about the business side of the industry by having them learn about gaming companies and develop a marketing letter including start-up costs and timelines. The program then took another important step by taking youth to an advertising agency where computer experts in various departments explained to youth how their computer skills were preparing them for jobs outside the gaming industry.

This model could be applied to other areas that often interest youth, as shown in the table on this page. For instance, research staff heard about one program that took youths' love of basketball and taught them to coach. This allowed youth to be involved in a sport they love, while learning coaching and mentoring skills. The final project was a clinic for younger children in the community, providing a clear end goal. An extra step would be to expose youth to the many jobs that require coaching and mentoring skills. Another program, highlighted in SEDL's training tool kit, builds from youths' love of music to teach them about the music production business (see Additional Resources). But as earlier findings suggest, for these experiences to really engage high school youth and teach them marketable skills, programs may need to find a way to leverage significant substantive expertise, guidance and work experiences in these areas.

Each type of programming – career exploration, work experiences and substantive programs – has its own barriers and requires different resources to implement well. The following section highlights barriers to each type of programming and shares creative solutions learned from real providers in the field.

Youth interests	Example of careers
<b>Sports</b>	Coaching, outdoor education, physical therapy, sports management, sports reporting
<b>Music</b>	Music production, writing for music magazines, music management, teaching music
<b>Money</b>	Finance, banking, investing, fundraising
<b>Cars</b>	Mechanics, engineering, advertising
<b>Vacation</b>	Travel agent, hotel management

# Barriers, Creative Solutions, and Challenging Questions for Each Type of Career Programming

The third goal of this study was to ask experienced providers what their main challenges were and to share their creative solutions and lessons learned with others who want to start or improve their career programming. Throughout this section, other research is brought in to guide practitioners toward research-based practices.

## Career Exploration

One of the central developmental tasks of adolescence is identity formation.<sup>xviii</sup> Thinking about potential careers is a critical part of that process. Career exploration helps youth learn about their own skills and interests, and how they fit into jobs and careers.<sup>xix</sup> Common career exploration activities included having youth use computer programs to identify their skills and interests and to highlight careers they might like, having youth do internet searches to learn the education and skills necessary for different careers, bringing in guest speakers, and going on field trips.

Career exploration requires few resources and *most OST programs can easily help youth with this developmental task*. Many resources already exist to help programs develop career exploration activities (see Additional Resources). There are some barriers to career exploration, but programs have developed many creative ways to overcome them.

*The Industry Clubs* introduced earlier in this guide overcame some of these barriers. They were designed and funded by the Northwest PA Workforce Investment Board (WIB). In some communities, clubs in several schools were supported by a central administrator, who used his networks to coordinate field trips and guest speakers. The WIB also provided the Industry Club leaders with information about growth occupations in their region, so club leaders could show youth careers that would let them stay in the area if they wanted to. This centralized guidance made the Industry Clubs efficient and easy to run for participating organizations.

Barriers	Creative solutions programs are using
<b>Finding guest speakers and field trip locations</b>	Connect with local industry groups or Workforce Investment Boards.
<b>Limited choices in rural areas or limited time</b>	Use Skype to bring in speakers from near or far.
<b>Making field trips and guest speakers genuine learning experiences</b>	Prepare youth in advance with information about the person or place and have each youth prepare one question to ask. • Help speakers prepare by suggesting an outline for their talk and helping them develop an active learning component. • Talk to field trip hosts about whether there can be a hands-on component to field trips, such as letting youth practice fixing broken fenders that would otherwise be discarded.
<b>Staff can't know everything about all careers</b>	Use computer programs, assessment tools, and the Internet to help youth identify their skills and highlight the skills and education various careers require.
<b>Limited or inadequate computer facilities</b>	Partner with schools or community colleges to use their facilities, especially in the summer

# Barriers, Creative Solutions, and Challenging Questions for Each Type of Career Programming (cont.)

As you think about designing career exploration activities, keep the developmental needs of youth in mind. Career exploration begins very early in childhood.<sup>xx</sup> By elementary school, many children have a sense of their skills and think they know, at least tentatively, what they want to be “when they grow up.”<sup>xxi</sup> Middle school is a terrific time for career exploration activities that expand youths’ horizons and introduce them to jobs and careers they may never have thought about or heard of. These activities can be springboards for helping youth select appropriate classes and activities in high school, and for developing a future orientation. By high school, youth often combine more exploration with deeper learning and real experiences related to careers of interest. Here substantive programming to learn skills and knowledge in areas that interest youth can mix well with career exploration activities that show youth the different fields where they can excel given their interests.

## Work Experiences

Staff researchers saw many different ways to involve youth in work. Two common strategies were placing youth in work sites throughout the community and hiring youth to work at

organizations. Work experiences can be unpaid internships for middle school students and paid experiences for older youth. Work experiences combine youths’ interest in getting paid with their need to prepare for the workforce. The paycheck can be an incentive for youth to attend and participate. The table below highlights some of the major differences between these two models. Engaging youth in work is much more difficult than providing career exploration help, so think carefully about whether you have the resources to offer work experiences.

Outlined below are several challenging questions that are important to think through as you design your program. These questions come from discussions with program directors and observations.

**Where will you get money to pay the youth?** Most programs relied on funding from local Workforce Investment Boards to pay youth. While some youth were engaged in entrepreneurial or fee-for-service activities, research staff did not see any programs where these efforts came close to replacing external funding.

	Strengths	Barriers	Creative solutions
<b>Place youth in local businesses and organizations</b>	Range of workplaces increases chances of matching job to youths’ interests. • Real-world experience in a worksite. • May lead to permanent job or useful reference.	Establishing relationships with worksites and finding placements. • Monitoring youth and handling problems. • Making the experience as easy for worksites as possible. • Preparing youth for the expectations of a real worksite.	Hire someone with strong links to local businesses. • Set up a monitoring system that includes weekly youth check-ins and scheduled site visits. • Spend at least a day training youth about expectations and work readiness. Have a contract with each youth and a dismissal policy in place.
<b>Hire youth to work at your organization</b>	Does not require community connections. • Youth are nearby so easier to monitor. • More control over the tasks youth do.	Finding enough work for youth to do that matches their different interests. • Making the experience as easy for the supervisor as possible. • Deciding on appropriate levels of responsibility for youth.	Think about helping with younger children, administration, fundraising and community projects. • Use the same monitoring system as above. • Identify a variety of positions youth can fill. As they learn new skills, move them up to a higher responsibility level.

# Barriers, Creative Solutions, and Challenging Questions for Each Type of Career Programming (cont.)

**What outcomes are you trying to impact?** Work experiences can teach work readiness skills like punctuality, work ethic and professional behavior. They can also teach 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and skills specific to particular occupations. They can be designed to help youth gain entry into a good organization or to ensure that youth have a credible work reference when they are done. But often they cannot do all of these things at once. Think very carefully about what you want youth to learn from the experience then be sure the jobs they do will actually achieve those goals.

**Will you wrap other programming around the paid work experience?** Most of the programs studied required some kind of educational component. Education research supports the idea that experiential learning – like a work experience – needs to be nested in instruction that: 1) ensures youth are prepared for the experience; 2) helps youth understand what they are supposed to get out of the experience; 3) provides youth with feedback on their performance to help them improve as they go; and 4) helps youth reflect on what they are learning.<sup>xxii</sup>

*Before the paid work experience:* Consider the needs of your youth and the jobs they will have. Some programs required work readiness training prior to job placement to ensure proper professional behavior. Others, particularly those hiring youth to work at their own organization, required substantive training such as teaching youth how to tutor.

*During the paid work experience:* Giving youth feedback on their work performance while there is still time to improve makes a paid work experience into a learning experience. Youth may benefit from feedback on their professionalism and on their performance of specific work tasks.<sup>xxiii</sup>

**What kind of work will youth do?** Whether youth are out in the workforce or working at your organization, you need to decide what kind of work they will do. While starting “at the bottom” is often part of life, good jobs for youth have certain characteristics. Research indicates that good jobs offer youth opportunities to interact with responsible adult mentors, learn new skills, have age-appropriate responsibility, and help them see the importance of education.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## Bethlehem Partnership for a Healthy Community

The jobs youth have through the *Bethlehem Partnership for a Healthy Community* initiative are “good jobs”. Youth are exposed to real departments in a hospital where they can see the roles filled by people with different education and skills, and they are mentored and supervised by professionals. They have opportunities to learn a variety of skills. Their tasks are age-appropriate but still important for the unit to function. There is also a clear path for youth who wish to pursue certifications and continue working at the hospital after high school.

## How much responsibility should youth have?

Developmentally, youth will differ in how much responsibility they can handle. Research from work settings indicates that too much autonomy can be harmful to youth workers, as they may not have the skills to handle the stress and responsibility.<sup>xxv</sup> But research from youth programs shows that youth learn responsibility when programs make youth responsible for the work and its outcomes, expect high quality work, let youth face the consequences of their actions when work is low quality, and have very clear rules, roles, deadlines and procedures in place. Youth actively assume responsibility when they feel like they have to succeed or they will let their peers or mentors down, and when there are consequences for failing and rewards for succeeding.<sup>xxvi</sup> It is important to note that in these youth programs, the consequences were important to the youth, but the consequences did not extend much beyond the youth (as they might in a real work setting). For instance, youth might lose the robotics competition or not get the lead in the next school play. Research to date does not provide enough clear guidance, but it may be that youth who need to learn responsibility are better served by learning these hard lessons in the safer environment of a youth program, whereas youth who have developed responsibility are ready to take on work assignments in the community.

# Barriers, Creative Solutions, and Challenging Questions for Each Type of Career Programming (cont.)

## Substantive Theme Programs

Many programs for youth revolve around a substantive theme such as art, music, technology or social justice. Here are some additional creative ideas research staff saw or heard about:

- *Explore science and engineering careers:* Turn youths' love of competition and action into an opportunity to learn about robotics. Link to one of the state or national level robotics groups. Many programs find local science teachers or engineers to teach youth how to build robots, and then enter youth into robotics competitions.
- *Explore art, construction or conservation careers:* Many communities have unpleasant areas that need revitalization. Many programs involve youth in efforts to revitalize their neighborhood by painting murals, planting or refurbishing green spaces, and renovating playgrounds. One program collaborated with a vocational school to teach construction skills and had youth renovate dilapidated houses in the community.

Out-of-school time programs often have experience running substantive theme programs and many resources exist to help programs implement good project-based learning. Creative solutions to two of the most common barriers are highlighted below. Following, several challenging issues discussed with directors or observed in the field are listed.

**Do you have a “tight” focus?** Clear outcomes and a tight focus may help resolve many of the other challenging questions posed below. It is easy within a substantive program to include too many units or promise funders you will cover many areas. You can tell you have promised too much if you are jumping from unit to unit within a day, spending considerable staff time coordinating different units, rushing to finish one unit so that you can get to the next one, or having to take over parts of a project so youth complete the work on time.

**Is the final product or event really motivating?** Many substantive programs end with a final product or event. This can add a clear focus, a motivating goal, and some closure at the end. But select a final product or event carefully. It needs to be *meaningful to the youth* to act as a motivator. Less motivating final products include PowerPoint presentations and posters. More motivating products include items they can put in a portfolio for college or work, competitions that display youths' newfound skills well and that are really active, and events where youths' new skills place them in leadership positions.

**Can youth articulate how the skills they are learning transfer to work settings?** Career counselors often talk about the importance of having “transferable skills” such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, budgeting and computer skills. These are skills that can be mastered in one context but are easily applicable in a new field. Explain the idea of transferable

Barriers	Creative solutions programs are using
<b>Requires staff who have significant substantive knowledge of the topic</b>	Partner with local business to bring in an expert who can lead the technical lessons for youth. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hire someone with both technical skills and youth work experience to run the program. While it seems challenging, we saw many people with these mixed backgrounds.</li> <li>• Look to local vocational schools or colleges for expertise and partners.</li> <li>• Find one person with the right mix of skills to provide substantive programming across multiple sites.</li> </ul>
<b>Requires strong instructional strategies</b>	Research staff did not see this, but programs should consider partnering with a local school or college to train staff on the basics of lesson planning including timing, amount of content to cover, strategies to keep groups working without taking over projects, and mixing classroom and project-based learning effectively.

# Barriers, Creative Solutions, and Challenging Questions for Each Type of Career Programming (cont.)

skills to youth and help them learn to describe how the skills they are learning at the program will be useful in real jobs. This will guarantee that youth understand the importance of what they are learning, and as researchers studying the Afterschool Matters initiative in Chicago note, may help youth articulate their skills to potential employers.<sup>xxvii</sup>

**Are youth screened to be sure they are prepared for the activity and is there a next step for youth who want to learn more?** In athletics and academics, youth are placed in classes and on sports teams based on an assessment of their skill level and there is a clear path from the lower levels to more advanced levels. Some OST programs have activities designed for those just entering the program and more sophisticated activities and experiences for more advanced youth. Others used rigorous application processes to ensure that youth being offered work-based learning experiences had the basic work readiness skills necessary to benefit from the experience. But more work in this area is necessary. Researchers should develop tools to help programs match youth with different readiness levels to appropriate career activities, and programs should think about offering or identify other opportunities in the community for youth who want to learn more.

## Additional Challenges for Programs Paying Youth to Work on Substantive Themes or at their Organization

Programs hiring youth to work at their organization or paying youth to work on substantive theme projects face several additional challenging issues.

**How much youth time will be paid?** Some programs pay youth for all their time even if they are engaged in education, some require youth to participate in work readiness training before they are eligible for a paid position, and others mix unpaid substantive programming with paid work days.

**Are youth program participants or workers?** Programs that hire youth to work at their organization or pay them to work on projects should think carefully about whether those youth are program participants or workers, and should convey their expectations clearly to youth. Without a clear

### Examples of Real Final Projects

Culinary arts: One program had a “Top Chef” competition modeled off the TV show.

Technology: One program had youth teach computer skills to adults in their neighborhood.

Arts or community improvement: Some programs made sure the unveiling of the final product was covered by local media, with youth prepared to explain what they had done and why.

decision on this, staff may have a hard time deciding how to respond in common situations. For instance, if youth discuss a difficult home experience while “working” at the program, from a youth development standpoint this is an opportunity to provide support and guidance, but in a real workplace these conversations might be inappropriate or interfere with workplace efficiency. Similarly, if youth are wary of a task that needs to be completed or behave inappropriately toward their supervisor, a youth worker might have a very different response than a real-world supervisor. Programs need to think carefully about how to find time for youth development, while ensuring that youth are learning about and prepared for the realities of jobs.

**Is it work or is it a youth-led project?** In a work project, there is a clear goal and supervisors intervene whenever necessary to ensure that workers deliver a product of acceptable quality. In a youth-led project, youth make decisions and learn from their mistakes, leading to variation in the final product’s quality. Youth learn something valuable – but different – from each of these projects. They may learn the right way to do something from a work-like project, providing real world experience and professional skills. From a youth-led project they may learn team-work, problem-solving, and strategic thinking. *Programs should think carefully about whether this will be a work project or a youth-led project, explain to youth clearly which kind of experience this will be, and select a final product or event that matches their choice.* For instance, an urban farming project could be structured two ways. The urban farm could partner with a local

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## Barriers, Creative Solutions, and Challenging Questions for Each Type of Career Programming (cont.)

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restaurant to supply it with fresh produce during the summer. This is a work project: Youth must plant and harvest the right way, the first time, to meet the restaurant's needs; or the urban farm can set up an arrangement to donate any acceptable produce to the local food bank to supplement its normal offerings. The food bank is grateful for any donations, but is not dependent on the youth. This allows room for a youth-led project. Perhaps the best way to discover whether a final project is work or youth-led is to ask: What happens if the kids make a big mistake?

**Are there licensing or professional standards the program should follow?** Programs should check with vocational schools and trade groups to be sure they are teaching youth in ways that conform to industry standards, where those standards exist. Training youth improperly can hurt youth when they move into the labor market, whereas aligning with industry standards may help youth make progress toward recognized certificates.

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## Conclusion

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Research on how to do career programming for youth during out-of-school time is still relatively new. However, based on this research and research in related fields, several conclusions can be drawn. Conceptually, there are some natural synergies between career programming and out-of-school time.

Career programming, when done well, should be designed around best practices in youth programming. These include exposing youth to the real world; teaching them workplace and life skills through hands-on projects, helping them explore their interests, and connecting them to adult role models. Career exploration, work experiences, and substantive programming can readily complement and extend lessons learned during the school day while feeling new and different to youth. Many OST programs have recognized this natural fit and are offering engaging career programming for youth.

Programs were able to engage youth in career exploration, work experiences, and substantive programming. The most engaging programs were more likely to have a very “tight” focus and several were summer or shorter school-year programs, raising important questions about how to balance the relative ease of engaging youth in shorter programming with the need to build mentoring relationships, offer stability, and scaffold learning experiences onto each other. Content can play an important role in engaging youth, but to do excellent content at the high school level likely requires staff or collaborators with considerable substantive knowledge of topics and fields youth may be interested in. As in other research on youth programs, how activities were implemented was also important for youth engagement. Hands-on activities that were challenging, well-organized and delivered by competent staff were most engaging. And while programs identified many barriers to doing various types of career programming, they had also come up with many creative solutions to overcome those barriers.

But there are also clear challenges to providing career programming that cannot be answered yet. It is known from research on job training, education and youth programming that helping the hardest-to-reach youth is very difficult. Many of those youth are not in the programs in this study so challenging

questions about how to serve those youth well cannot be answered yet. More broadly, research needs to do a better job identifying which kinds of career programs are most likely to help youth with different characteristics. Answers are needed to questions like: Which youth will benefit from very broad career exploration? When are youth ready to really benefit from paid work experiences? Which youth need more intensive programming than OST can provide and how do youth get into those programs? More broadly still, schools, OST, vocational education, workforce development, and post-secondary education need a way to come together to develop a system of continuous learning and career development that helps youth identify and move into the next appropriate learning environment. With the tight budget conditions that will be in place for the next several years and the considerable needs of the nation's youth, these questions about how to coordinate across systems become even more pressing.

### Research Reviews in Key Areas

Heinrich, C. & Holzer, H. (2010). *Improving Education and Employment for Disadvantaged Young Men*. National Poverty Center Working Paper Series, #10-04.

This reviews evaluations for several programs and policy initiatives, and identifies promising strategies for engaging disadvantaged youth.

Terzian, M., Moore, K. A., & Hamilton, K. (2009). *Effective and Promising Summer Learning Programs and Approaches for Economically-Disadvantaged Children and Youth: A White Paper for the Wallace Foundation*. Washington, D.C.: Child Trends.

This reviews evaluations for summer programs for disadvantaged youth.

Hirsch, B. J., Hedges, L. V., Stawicki, J., & Mekinda, M. A. (2011). *After-School Programs for High School Students: An Evaluation of After School Matters*. Retrieved from [www.sesp.northwestern.edu/docs/publications/19023555234df57ecd0d6c5.pdf](http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/docs/publications/19023555234df57ecd0d6c5.pdf)

While much of the discussion focuses on improving the After School Matters apprenticeship model, many of the lessons are broadly applicable to career programming.

### Resources on Career Programming

#### PA Department of Education

Standards for career programming and examples of activities.  
[www.pacareerstandards.com](http://www.pacareerstandards.com)

#### Florida State Career Programming Resources

Other states also have good career programming resources, for example the state of Florida.

[www.fldoe.org/workforce/ced/ced\\_workplace.asp](http://www.fldoe.org/workforce/ced/ced_workplace.asp)

#### Career Cruising

Well-respected career guidance and planning that system programs may find useful for facilitating career exploration activities.

[www.careercruising.com](http://www.careercruising.com)

### Occupational Outlook Handbook

The U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Outlook Handbook can help youth learn about the education, potential earnings, and demand for hundred of careers.

[www.bls.gov/oco](http://www.bls.gov/oco)

### O\*Net OnLine

Great resource for learning about different types of careers.

[www.onetonline.org](http://www.onetonline.org)

### SEDL's After School Training Toolkit

Great videos showing substantive theme programming.

[www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/index.html](http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/index.html)

Example of a program using youths' love of music to teach about music production and technology careers.

[www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/video/index.html#ast\\_tech\\_making\\_music](http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/video/index.html#ast_tech_making_music)

### Promising Pathways to Careers Tool Kit

The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children has released a tool kit to help employers and programs develop quality work-based learning initiatives.

[www.papartnerships.org/work/youth-development/toolkit/](http://www.papartnerships.org/work/youth-development/toolkit/)

### From Soft Skills to Hard Data: Measuring Youth Program Outcomes

A new report by the Forum for Youth Investment that reviews several tools to measure skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.

<http://forumfyi.org/content/soft-skills-hard-data->

## Appendix: Study Methodology

The goals of the current study were to: 1) explore how OST programs implement career programming, 2) determine which career-related activities youth find most engaging, and 3) identify barriers to successful career programming as well as creative strategies to overcome those barriers.

**Sample:** Twenty-six out-of-school time programs in Pennsylvania that provided career programming and served primarily low-income or high-risk middle and high school students were studied. Programs were identified by asking funders, trainers, heads of multi-site organizations, and other local experts in the OST field to recommend quality programs. The focus was on programs with a reputation for providing quality services because of the difficulty lower quality programs have engaging youth. This allowed for concentration on the unique role of career programming over and above basic quality issues.

Because the goal was to understand the range of career programming being done and the barriers to program implementation across various contexts, programs that ranged in content and context were strategically selected. The sample includes programs in Philadelphia ( $n=8$ ), Pittsburgh ( $n=8$ ), and outside of major urban areas including rural programs ( $n=10$ ); programs offering career exploration ( $n=13$ ), paid work experiences ( $n=12$ ), and substantive theme programming ( $n=18$ ); school-year ( $n=13$ ) and summer ( $n=13$ ) programs; and programs serving middle school ( $n=5$ ) and high school ( $n=21$ ) students.

**Data Collection:** At each program, a director interview, a site visit and youth surveys were conducted. These three sources of data were used to ensure multiple reports on each of the main constructs in this study. The hour-long semi-structured *director interview* provided information about the program's goals, activities, staffing and structure, enrollment and attendance, challenges, and creative solutions. Program directors were given a \$50 gift card to thank them for participating in the study. The *site visits* were conducted by trained observers who used an observation protocol designed by Policy Studies Associates and adapted for this study. The observations lasted for an afternoon or full-day, depending

on program duration. Observation data included measures of activity content, relationship quality, instructional strategies, youth engagement, attendance, and available resources. As is standard for observation protocols, observers took notes for 20-30 minutes then coded each activity across this set of measures. Multiple activities within a program were coded when possible, for a total of 86 activities across 26 programs. Observers were also encouraged to take field notes as necessary to ensure that the data portrayed an accurate picture of the program. After each site visit research staff debriefed the observers, recording their overall observations from the program and discussing how the program informed the emerging themes. Youth at each program were asked to complete a *15 minute survey* that was administered via cell phone technology ( $n=393$  surveys across 26 programs). Multiple choice and Likert scale questions asked youth to report on how engaging the program was, their relationships with the staff, the types of activities they had participated in, and basic demographics. Because plans were to aggregate the youth survey data to create program level scores, data on all youth at smaller programs and a subset of youth (up to 35) at larger programs were collected. At each program one \$15 iTunes card was raffled off to thank the youth for completing the survey.

**Characteristics of Program Youth:** Half of the students were male, 45% African-American, 27% Hispanic, 10% white, and 18% were mixed race. Although all programs served low-income youth and many were in very distressed neighborhoods, 61% of youth reported getting all A's or A's and B's in school, 35% reported getting B's and C's, with only 6% reporting getting C's or lower.

**Overall Analysis Strategy:** The analyses for this study were based on a qualitative multi-case study method. After all data for a site was collected, research staff wrote a case study using the interview, site visit, and aggregated youth survey data. This method allowed for drawing from each data source when describing the program content, overall quality, instructional strategies, barriers, creative solutions, and youth engagement. As is common in qualitative studies, the research team met frequently to identify and discuss emerging themes.

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## Appendix: Study Methodology (cont.)

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The themes that emerged from these discussions formed the foundation of the coding schemes when data analysis began.

### **Goal 1 Analysis Strategy:**

#### **How is career programming being implemented?**

To answer this question, we used activity level data from the program observations and information from the director interviews to identify any career-related program content. An initial coding scheme was created based on discussions during data collection. Two research team members independently attempted to fit all career-related activities into the coding scheme. The coding scheme was independently revised to ensure that all activities fit into a category, then worked together to create one coding scheme based on the changes we had individually made until all of the career-related activities observed could be placed within the scheme.

### **Goal 2 Analysis Strategy:**

#### **Engaging youth in career programming**

*Program level engagement:* To retain focus on career development, research staff created a measure for each program based on their success at engaging youth in productive activities. To create this measure research staff took the average of these indicators: observer-reported youth engagement across all activities; youth-reported engagement in the program (from a 4-item scale of items such as “The activities I do at this program are interesting to me”); youth-reported program effectiveness (from a 7-item scale asking items such as “The program helped me: get good grades, communicate ideas better, learn about different jobs and careers”); and a post-hoc scoring by the research team for each program indicating the likelihood that if evaluated, the program would produce significant impacts on these same effectiveness outcomes. For the post-hoc measure of effectiveness, each program was scored independently by two research team members and discrepant scores reconciled through discussion. Combining these four indicators of engagement and effectiveness netted a program-level score with a plausible range from 1-5 (5 indicating highest engagement in productive activities). Then 0.3 points were deducted from programs that were coded as having significant problems with enrollment and attendance. From this final

score, programs were placed into three categories: *lower engagement* ( $\leq 3.4$ ,  $n=8$ ), *medium engagement* (3.5 – 3.9,  $n=9$ ), and *high engagement* ( $\geq 4.0$ ,  $n=9$ ). To identify the characteristics that distinguished the most engaging programs from the less engaging programs, the literature and emerging hypotheses were used to generate a list of 19 potentially relevant characteristics. Each program was coded on these characteristics. Then research staff identified the characteristics in which the higher engagement programs differed most consistently from the lower engagement programs.

*Activity level engagement:* Quantitative analyses in an activity-level data file and regression techniques were used. The dependent variable was observed youth engagement in an activity. A series of independent variables at the activity level including relationship quality, instructional strategies, and activity content were tested. To account for multiple observations per program and to net out the baseline program quality, research staff controlled for the program-level engagement score created above in all models.

### **Goal 3 Analysis Strategy:**

#### **Barriers, creative solutions, and challenging questions**

The barriers and creative solutions identified come from the director interviews and program observations. For each type of career programming, research staff created an Excel spreadsheet where they drew from the case studies to document any recorded barriers to this type of programming or areas where programs struggled in their efforts to engage youth. Any observed or reported creative solutions to overcoming those barriers were documented. Many of the challenging questions come from discussions with directors in the study or the research team’s discussions of emerging themes throughout data collection; a small number come from discussions with other experts in the field.

### **Selection of Programs Named in Guide:**

These programs were selected because they a) were in the high engagement group, and b) provided a clear example of the themes highlighted in the guide.

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## **Notes**

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