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Gateway to Opportunity:

A promising summer youth employment model to address local workforce needs

by Nikki Williams and Susy Hawes Peoples

Abstract

Throughout Maine, employers struggle to find workers with in-demand skills and competencies. Concurrently, work-eligible youth are often unable to find skill-building employment experiences. The Gateway to Opportunity (G2O) program is a comprehensive youth-adult partnership model developed in Portland, Maine, that is designed to address both of these challenges. G2O connects high-school-aged young people with paid, work-based learning projects at Maine-based businesses and nonprofits. The model for this program is based on national best practices and lessons learned from multiple highly successful summer youth employment initiatives led by Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities from 2011 to 2013. This article highlights the development and growth of this program model and explores how innovative work-based learning programs such as G2O are critical for Maine's workforce and local economy.

Portland, Maine, and designed to address these challenges for both employers and youth. G2O connects high-school-aged young people (typically 16- to 19-year-olds who are both in school and out of school) with paid, work-based learning projects where they hone and develop 21st century skills.¹ Since its launch in the summer of 2016, the G2O program has worked with nearly 120 young people (85 percent of whom report primarily speaking a language other than English in their home and 83 percent of whom identify as people of color), 30 college-aged team leaders, and over 20 host site organizations and businesses. In addition, the program engages dozens of collaborative stakeholders, including investors, partner organizations, volunteers, thought leaders, and advisory board members. This dynamic, cross-sector approach of community engagement leverages local involvement and centers networking and relationship building for young people as core components of the model. This article summarizes the key elements, successes, and lessons of Portland's G2O program and provides evidence to raise the economic and social value of increasing investment in innovative work-based learning programs.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout Maine, employers struggle to find workers with in-demand skills and competencies to build a talent pipeline that will meet both their current and future workforce needs. Concurrently, work-eligible youth are often unable to find skill-building employment experiences (Remington [2020](#)). The misalignment between employer expectations and needs and the skills and experience of the emerging workforce is a national trend, not a challenge that is unique to Maine (Remington [2020](#); Ross et al. [2020](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the complexity of navigating the labor market for many young people, particularly those from low-income backgrounds and Black and Latino or Hispanic youth who experience racism and are disproportionately represented among the low-wage workforce (Ross et al. [2020](#)). The Gateway to Opportunity (G2O) program is a comprehensive youth-adult partnership model that was developed in

A COORDINATED RESPONSE FOR EMPLOYERS AND THE EMERGING WORKFORCE

Prior to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, Maine's unemployment rates had steadily declined for the last 10 years (CWRI [n.d.](#)). However, in 2014, as community partners in Portland prepared to convene to address the need for career pathways for low-income youth, youth

unemployment was high and participation in the labor market was decreasing. Twenty-four percent of 16- to 19-year-olds in Portland were unemployed in 2014—almost three and a half times higher than Portland’s general population unemployment rate of 7 percent in 2014 (US Census Bureau [2014](#)). Between 2010 and 2014, Portland experienced a gradual downward trend in youth labor force participation rates from the 2010 five-year average participation rate of 51 percent to the 2014 five-year average of 40 percent (US Census Bureau [2014](#)). While youth struggled to find jobs, employers searched to find workers with demonstrated workforce competencies, including proven academic success and critical thinking and interpersonal skills. These factors, coupled with Maine’s slow-growing and aging workforce, positioned Portland well for a youth-employment initiative.

In 2015 through the leadership of the John T. Gorman Foundation (a Maine-based private foundation), a group of stakeholders convened to address the issue of limited career-based pathways and opportunity for low-income young people in the state. The purpose of this group was to design and implement a pilot project for Portland that was guided by the successful summer youth-employment initiatives from the Center for Youth and Communities (CYC) at Brandeis University and the Summer Youth Employability Communities of Practice. These initiatives employed and educated 8,500 young people in 10 cities around the country and documented social, economic, and environmental outcomes for participants and their communities with unprecedented academic and employment outcomes (CYC [2014](#)). Evaluation findings demonstrated that in successful youth-employability initiatives, youth persisted through secondary and post-secondary education, developed the critical skills employers need, and more successfully connected to the workforce.

Building their approach off the successful outcomes from the CYC initiatives, the Youth and Community Engagement team at the University of Southern Maine’s (USM) Cutler Institute, along with several local partners and funders, launched Gateway to Opportunity in the summer of 2016.² In the G2O program, youth participants are placed on teams at local businesses and nonprofits where they are paid to work for 20 hours a week on a work-based learning project. Each host site identifies the project scope and designates an on-site staff person to serve as the

supervisor and oversee the work of the team. Undergraduate college students hired and trained to serve as near-peer mentors, called “team leaders,” provide hands-on guidance to the participants and support the successful completion of project work. The central premise of the model is that youth are responsible for advancing the project with guidance from supportive near-peers and adults. This youth-led approach supports the development of teamwork, problem-solving, communication, and career-readiness.

DETAILS OF THE MODEL

Maine’s workforce development concerns will not be easily solved. As evidenced in Remington’s 2020 article, these longstanding issues affecting both employers and Maine’s emerging employee pool must be addressed with a coordinated, cross-sector community response. The G2O program does just that; G2O engages and educates three target groups: young people, college students, and local businesses and nonprofits.

- **Young people:** the priority population is low-income (eligible for free or reduced lunch and other public benefits), high-school-aged youth who participate in paid, work-based learning projects where they receive hands-on support from near-peer mentors and other adults and build competencies to meet the demands of both academic and workplace settings.
- **College students:** hired and trained to serve as team leaders, college students build experience as supervisors and project managers in potential career pathways while developing their professional networks and employability skills. Many of the team leaders hired represent similar demographics and experiences of the youth participants.
- **Local businesses and nonprofits:** staff receive training and the opportunity to invest in young people who live in their communities, build their own skills and awareness of youth-adult partnerships, and connect to a local talent pipeline.

This multilayered approach builds public-private partnerships and connects and engages different populations across communities. While G2O’s outcomes affect both employers and participants, the program model has

consistently been grounded in six core principles that position youth in the center. These elements, which are programmatically operated in different ways over the summer, ensure G2O participants gain and strengthen work-based competencies that many employers require in new hires. No other program in Maine takes the same approach. G2O's six essential elements ensure youth participants

1. work in project teams rather than individually;
2. have the freedom to self-direct their day-to-day tasks with guidance from supportive adults and near-peers;
3. reflect on their employability development and learning;
4. take ownership of designing their final work products;
5. receive mentorship and support from a variety of caring adults and near-peers; and
6. gain exposure to fundamental 21st century skills through career-focused workshops and events.

With the constant focus on youth empowerment and growth, and a recognition that both team leaders and host site supervisors need targeted, skills-based training prior to engaging with youth in this context, the G2O program begins with interactive training sessions. Sessions are designed to highlight the key elements of G2O and what makes the program different from other summer youth employment initiatives. Team leaders and supervisors learn tangible facilitation techniques, how to engage youth in reflection activities, identify youth leadership opportunities, address challenging situations, and welcome different perspectives and diverse ideas. Trainings for team leaders in particular focused on their leadership role and the importance of serving as a near-peer support to their team, including building an understanding of and appreciation for youth empowerment, collaboration, and relationship building. The preprogram training and built-in near-peer and adult support for youth participants are critical components of the program and cornerstones of high-quality work-based learning programs. As noted by the Brookings Institution, “adult supervisors, mentors, instructors, and others in a [work-based learning] context can provide youth with access to valuable resources such as information, assistance, exposure to adult worlds, support,

and encouragement” (Ross et al. [2020](#): 17). Each year, the trainings are evaluated through feedback forms and key informant interviews. While trainings may look different over the years, these preprogram training sessions are critical to ensuring G2O is implemented with fidelity and respect to the essential components of the model.

Demographics of Youth Participants

From 2016 to 2019, G2O engaged 118 youth from six of the Greater Portland–area traditional and alternative high schools.³ The majority of students were rising juniors (44 percent) or seniors (36 percent) with 56 percent identifying as female. (The term rising indicates they are entering that grade in the upcoming year.) Seventy percent of the students identified as Black or African American and 17 percent as White. More detailed demographic information illuminates the diversity of G2O participants: students indicated they speak one or more of 14 different languages, with more than a quarter of students reporting they speak Somali and 22 percent, Arabic. Fifty-four percent are US citizens and 20 percent identify as asylum seekers. Ninety percent report that as a result of their participation in G2O they had earnings or savings to contribute to their families' household expenses.

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

Since its inception, assessment and evaluation have been integral to G2O's overall strategic planning and program implementation. Evaluation of this program has been ongoing and cyclical. Thoughtful review and reflection of evaluation results allowed for continuous quality improvement and data-informed decision-making. The evaluation team from the Cutler Institute's Data Innovation Project used a mixed-method approach and developed and deployed five evaluation tools over the course of the summer programming from 2017 to 2019, capturing both qualitative and quantitative data from youth, team leaders, and supervisors. In addition to tools to capture outputs and track process measures, the evaluation team used an end-of-program survey and post-program data collection to capture short and mid-term outcomes of participant involvement (Table 1). This section synthesizes results of the end-of-year evaluations with youth, team leaders, and host sites and winter follow-up interviews with youth and team leaders to demonstrate results based on three years of data.

TABLE 1: Data Collection Tools and Sample Sizes

	Number of respondents to end-of-program survey (%)	Number of respondents to winter follow up (%)
Youth participants	80/91 (88)	39/65 (60)
Team leaders	23/23 (100)	14/24 (58)

Outcomes for Youth

Summative data collected from 91 youth participants in G2O programs from the summers of 2017–2019 demonstrates that the program was successful in building intended 21st century skills to support overall personal growth and success in the classroom and workplace. As demonstrated in Figure 1, analysis of retrospective post-preprogram data using a paired samples t-test indicates statistically significant gains in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and work-readiness skills.⁴ Data indicate G2O had the greatest impact on communication skills.

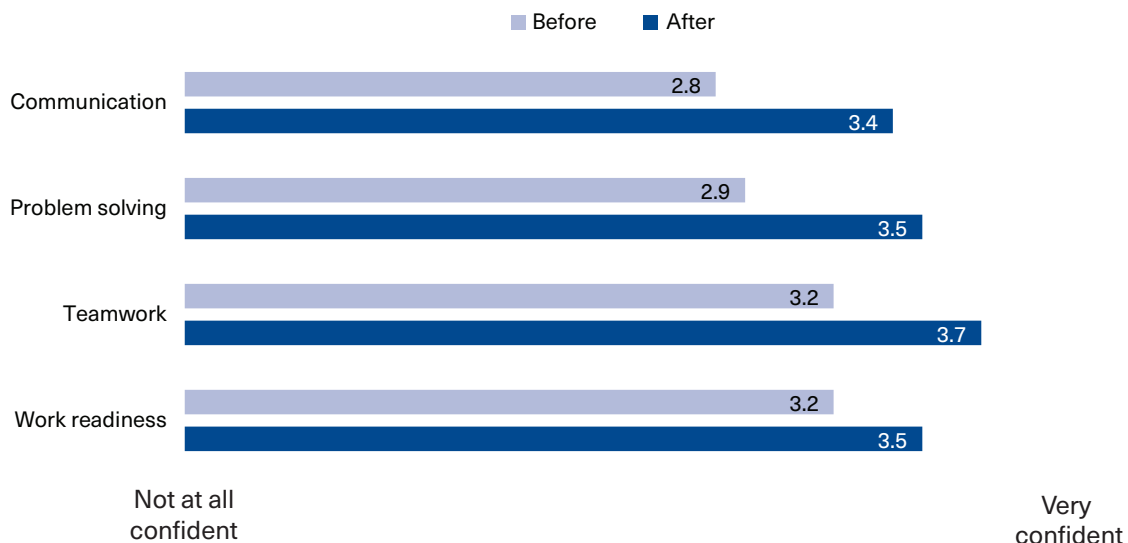
Analysis of qualitative data highlights these results; when sharing lessons and strengths of the summer program, youth consistently referenced improved communication skills—from public speaking to communicating ideas.

G2O provided opportunities for young people to practice different types of communication skills, including one on one, in small and large groups, and publicly. The greatest quantitative gains, which were also confirmed in qualitative data, were made in “comfort communicating with others,” with the specific skill of “feeling comfortable talking in a group.”

We learned a lot of how to do project management. I see myself planning ahead and see how it is all going to go when I'm tackling a project in school and my own projects. — G2O Youth

Data from interviews conducted with youth participants during the winters following programming in 2017 and 2018 indicate that they used skills gained in G2O months after program completion, indicating a longer-term behavioral-level change. One-hundred percent of interviewed youth reported they were using skills learned in G2O in school or a workplace, including communication, teamwork, leadership, and project management skills. In interviews, young people cite increased ability to obtain and successfully maintain a job due to skills learned during

FIGURE 1: Reported Improvement in 21st Century Skills Due to Participation in G2O



Data collected from 91 youth participants in G2O programs from the summers of 2017–2019.

G2O; specifically, 69 percent of interviewed youth participants report their experience in G2O built workplace skills or helped them to obtain a job because of their experience with resume building and interviewing.

In addition to skill building, G2O successfully informed youth participants' perspectives on both their future academic and career goals. Youth expressed increased vision and excitement for their future, likely a result of G2O's emphasis on relationship-building (with peers, college-aged team leaders and host site staff) and the intentional work-based learning that exposes young people to different career opportunities. Sixty-four percent of G2O youth reported the program positively influenced their college or career plans.

G2O taught me a lot of patience that I use at work. Sometimes people are not very kind and I have to diffuse it by talking to them. It's getting to know everyone's point of view. — G2O Youth

Outcomes for Team Leaders

While team leaders gained a variety of skills and experiences in their role in G2O, most significant, as self-reported in qualitative and quantitative data, were improvements in supervisory skills. Team leaders indicated that this was both their greatest opportunity for learning, as many did not have previous supervisory experience, and the place where they saw the greatest improvement over the course of the summer. Specifically, team leaders indicated improved skills in supporting group dynamics like working through difficult situations and coming to consensus, leading team-building activities, and providing structure to groups. When commenting on highlights of the summer, a number of team leaders said they most enjoyed watching their youth team members grow and change. One team leader reported enjoying watching the youth grow into “powerful, young, brilliant individuals.” Team leaders were able to see the impact of their leadership and supervisory skills as they witnessed improvements in group dynamics and individual growth in their team members.

[G2O] helped me branch out and explore my opportunities and take risks into finding out what I'm good at. — Team Leader

In interviews with team leaders four to five months after the program ended, 93 percent reported that G2O

influenced their goals and aspirations for life after college. Participation in G2O made them more aware of specific opportunities for engagement in the Portland area and raised their knowledge of and increased interest in potential careers that relate to community or individual well-being. Additionally, working directly with young people gave them first-hand experience of the impact that career exploration could have on youth in their community.

Although at the end of the summer team leaders reported seeing the greatest improvement in their supervisory and leadership skills, interviews the following winter indicate that team leaders were most likely to have used improved communication and professional skills like confidence, adaptability, and project management. Ninety-three percent of team leaders reported using skills gained in G2O in their personal, academic, or professional lives. In 2018, 100 percent of responding team leaders who were employed at the time, cited ways in which G2O helped with employment, including networking, using new skills, and the ability to reference their work with the program in job interviews.

G2O gave me the opportunity to network in the Portland area, and I met many people who were willing to be mentors for me in my career path. — Team Leader

Outcomes for Host Sites

While G2O's engagement with local businesses and nonprofits was not as intentionally targeted to build host site staffs' skills as it was for youth and team leaders, preprogram training and communication with host sites did intend to change their perceptions of and increase knowledge about the values of youth-adult partnerships. Specifically, G2O hoped that in the long term, local businesses engaged in the program would be better positioned and more likely to successfully hire and retain young employees. Analysis of three years of end-of-summer survey data demonstrated that 100 percent of the host site supervisors surveyed report that as a result of their participation in G2O, they understand how 21st century skills help young people in the workplace and believe investing in young people is an investment in the success of Maine's workforce. In this way, G2O influenced perceptions and beliefs related to its intended strategies for the success of Maine's future workforce.

TABLE 2: **Host Site Supervisors' Self-Reported Skill Levels***

	Before G2O	After G2O	Percentage Change
I am good at helping youth team members come to decisions.	3.0	3.3	+0.4
I am open to learning from young people on my team.	3.5	3.8	+0.3
I am good at providing structure to groups of young people I work with.	3.1	3.4	+0.3
I look for strengths in young people.	3.5	3.7	+0.2
I am confident working through challenging group dynamics with young people.	2.8	3.0	+0.2
I am a role model for appropriate workplace behavior for young people.	3.4	3.5	+0.04

*Likert scale weighted averages, 1=strongly disagree, 4=strongly agree

As detailed in Table 2, end-of-summer survey data from host site supervisors indicate that, on average, staff were open to working with and learning from young people at the start of the summer, but had fewer specific skills to support positive youth-adult partnerships. By the end of the summer, supervisors reported the greatest gains in helping youth make decisions and in providing structure to groups of young people. Although supervisors self-reported entering the program highly confident in their openness to learning from people on their team (3.5 on a 4-point scale), their engagement in G2O still had an impact on this area as it showed one of the largest reported increases.

Each of these skills can likely transcend their work with young people and have positive impacts in other aspects of their job. Analysis indicates statistically significant increases in four of the six measured concepts. However, G2O did not as significantly impact host site supervisors' confidence in working through challenging group dynamics with young people or their view that they are a role model for appropriate workplace behavior for young people.

Opportunities for Future Research

As G2O continues to hone its approach and objectives, future research may help to identify the specific conditions that have the most impact on achieving these outcomes. That is, what are the key aspects of

programming that drive outcomes for youth, team leaders, and host sites? Is it the preprogram training, the demographics of youth and team leaders, the host site supervisors' role or a combination of all features of this approach? This information is particularly important as the G2O model is brought to scale. Program refinement and expansion efforts would likely look different if outcomes were driven by the needs of young people—youth and team leaders—vs the business and nonprofit community.

CONCLUSION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR MAINE

Unfortunately, there are too few programs like G2O nationally or in Maine. Long-term, sustained investment from the public and private sectors has been a goal for G2O's growth and expansion, but it has remained a challenge as program coordinators have to pursue annual grant funds to support the work. In spite of the difficulty in securing long-term funding, as G2O approaches its sixth year, the model continues to grow and positively affect youth and communities across Maine. In the summer of 2020, amidst a global pandemic that halted the majority of in-person learning and shuttered schools and businesses, the Maine Youth Action Network (MYAN) coordinated four G2O project teams in Cumberland County in Portland, South Portland, and Bridgton. MYAN successfully engaged 17 high-school-aged youth, four team leaders, and four host sites in their six-week program, which was 90 percent virtual. Data from the summer of 2020 suggest that the program successfully met a number of key indicators and demonstrated outcomes that are aligned with the first four years of G2O programming as outlined in this article. USM's Youth and Community Engagement team, collaborating with MYAN and other stakeholders, are committed to continuing to nurture this proven program within and beyond Maine. MYAN's 2020 program success is an exciting opportunity for continued quality improvement, refinement, and expansion.

As we have outlined, G2O is a strong example of an evidence-based, work-based learning strategy with proven outcomes. Analysis of three years of data from G2O demonstrates the program is highly successful at building

key skills in youth and team leaders that are important for their transition to the workforce. This evidence is further supported by the findings of the Brandeis-led initiative that provided the foundation for G2O's design as well as Ross et al.'s (2020) comprehensive analysis on the efficacy of work-based learning models. Maine's G2O program creates the positive conditions that foster relationships, partnerships, and collaboration with a variety and diversity of audiences, including high-school-aged participants, college-aged team leaders, host site supervisors, and local businesses and nonprofits. The foundational youth-adult partnership approach, which is a signature model of USM's Youth and Community Engagement team, coupled with the evidence-based employment model leads to a unique opportunity to build the skills of Maine's young people.

It is time to bring this program to scale and expand its impact so all youth in Maine have the opportunities offered through this innovative program and a broader sector of businesses, agencies, and organizations benefit from this targeted workforce development effort. Maine needs a large-scale, evidence-based approach that builds young people's career readiness and skills through hands-on work experience during the summer and beyond. This approach must also address the talent development needs of businesses and nonprofits across the state. With a multi-year commitment and mix of public and private funding, the Gateway to Opportunity program is poised to step into this role.

NOTES

- 1 Definitions: Out-of-school youth are often defined as 16- to 24-year-olds who are disconnected from school and work. For more information, see <https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2017/03/09/11/34/WIOA-Youth-Program-Eligibility>. "High-quality work-based learning experiences pair young people with mentors who show them how to solve real-world problems, cultivate professional skills, shoulder adult responsibilities, build workplace relationships, identify interests and aptitudes, and make good decisions about careers and college," according to the Southern Regional Education Board (Ross et al. 2020: 13). Twenty-first century skills are informed by the *Framework for 21st Century Learning*.
- 2 From 2016 to 2018, G2O received significant planning, design, and implementation funding from the John T. Gorman Foundation and the Maine Economic Improvement Fund (MEIF) at the University of Southern Maine. MEIF remains a core funder for this work to present day. Goodwill Industries of Northern New England was a core partner in the development, implementation, and continuous quality improvement of the model and served as the lead program partner from 2016 to 2019. Staff from Brandeis's Center for Youth and Communities served as advisors during the launch of the G2O pilot in 2016. Staff from the Greater Portland Workforce Initiative, the city of Portland's Office of Economic Opportunity, Goodwill, USM's Youth and Community Engagement team, and the John T. Gorman Foundation came together in an advisory committee in the early years of the program to oversee program improvements and implementation. The Maine Youth Action Network also served as a core program partner since 2016 and is poised to support expansion of the program across Maine in 2021 and beyond.
- 3 Demographic information was not consistently collected for youth participants in G2O at the time of enrollment.
- 4 In an attempt to capture the impact of the program on participants' skills and strengths in the communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and work-readiness domains, the end-of-program survey included a retrospective post-pre design; participants were directed to read each statement and respond with two scores, the first thinking about their confidence with the statement before G2O and the second thinking about their confidence with the statement after G2O. Youth rated four statements, or subscales, on each domain. Responses were analyzed as averages pre and post, both as individual subscales and domains, to look for changes that may have occurred because of participation in G2O.

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empowers them to implement their vision for more inclusive and equitable institutions, systems, and communities.



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stakeholders in data-informed decision-making to ensure results for youth, team leaders, and host sites.