CHAPIN HALL
CENTER FOR CHILDREN
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Making Connections: Engaging Employers In Preparing Chicago's Youth for the Workforce

Jan DeCoursey
Ada Skyles

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Engaging employers in youth workforce preparation activities is widely supported as a good practice among youth program providers and educators. Although limited, research finds that engaging employers in youth workforce preparation activities may be beneficial for youth. Since 2002, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago has been exploring the inclusion of employers in youth workforce preparation activities in our research on youth workforce development. Here, we explore possible disconnects between stakeholders and the effects these disconnects may have on expanding employer involvement. We also explore strategies to enhance efforts to engage employers in youth workforce preparation initiatives and to improve the quality of the experience for employers, program providers, and youth.

The findings were derived from interviews conducted in 2003 and late 2005 with youth program providers, educators, employers, and policy experts. We conducted thirty-four interviews in 2003 and twenty-four interviews in 2005. The interviews are focused on Chicago and the surrounding metropolitan area. All of the interviewees were involved in programs that served disadvantaged youth, including youth who are poor, have low levels of educational achievement, are African American or Hispanic, have been convicted of committing a crime, and/or have a disability.

We asked about the degree to which youth and employers are prepared to engage with each other, whether youth with the greatest needs are likely to engage in workforce preparation activities with employers, how youth race and culture influence employer engagement, and whether program and policy efforts to bring employer engagement with youth to scale with youth and program demand are in alignment with employer motives to participate. Important disconnects emerged from the interviews. First, in their zeal to place job-ready youth with

employers, the need for supportive services may be overlooked. Youth may need to learn to navigate public transportation, how to dress for the workplace, and who to call if they are going to be late or absent. Many, though not all, providers offer these services. We found that when employers confront these problems with young people, they were not aware of whether or where the services are available. This gap poses two risks: potential employers may be alienated rather than engaged, and that the youth with the greatest need for help in connecting with employers may have the least opportunity to do so. Through our discussion of disconnects, we also explore the effect of race on youth and employers' experience. Although racial differences are evident to the majority of youth and employers who engage in youth workforce preparation activities together, few programs and employers openly address these differences. Finally, we explore how existing efforts to expand employer engagement may be misaligned with employer interests.

Disadvantaged youth attempting to engage with employers through youth program providers have a variety of needs, such as education about workplace expectations and personal relationships that will meet their needs throughout their experience with employers. However, employers vary in their willingness to provide education about the workplace and to engage in supportive relationships with youth. All of the employers and program providers we interviewed agreed that youth must be ready for the workplace, but there is no consistent definition of ready. Program providers attempt to anticipate employers' interests by referring youth they see as job ready. That is, needing minimal assistance acclimating to the workplace. Providers have few expectations that employers engage with the youth on a personal level. Moreover, providers give employers little information about how to meet the needs of youth, should they be willing. When youth and employers do experience challenges, their needs often go unaddressed. Further, when only job ready youth are referred to employers, the youth who are most in need of workforce

preparation training and eventual experiences to engage with employers, especially youth who are young, youth who are out-of-school, youth who are ex-offenders, and youth with disabilities, may experience much greater difficulty finding opportunities to engage with employers.

In our discussion of another disconnect, we explore the effect of race on youth and employers' experience. The employers interviewed for this research primarily engaged with youth who are black or Hispanic. We observed that providers and employers had difficulty expressing their thoughts about the influence of race and ethnicity on youth and employers' experiences. We found that providers and employers do not discuss racial and cultural differences directly with youth, but expect that youth adjust quickly to the cultural norms of the workplace.

We also found that existing efforts to expand employer involvement may not align with employer interests, and ultimately may deter employers from participating. Current programmatic efforts to engage employers are focused on dramatically increasing the number of for-profit employers engaged with youth. Expanding the number of employers involved without providing the infrastructure to ensure employers and youth are supported may limit the quality of the experience, and ultimately deter employers from participating.

In the final section, we suggest re-examining the role of stakeholders to help resolve the disconnects employers and youth program providers experience as they prepare youth for future work. We explore alternative roles for employers in preparing youth for work, the role of youth program providers in providing the critical assistance youth need to prepare for work and to engage with employers, and the role of educators and the education system in preparing youth for work. We conclude with observations about stakeholder willingness to pursue the goal of

preparing youth for the workforce, and how greater alignment with this goal may better prepare

disadvantaged youth for future participation in the workforce.

INTRODUCTION

Employer engagement in youth workforce preparation programs provides young people with opportunities to make connections with employers, gain first hand knowledge about the workforce, and acclimate themselves to the workplace. For many disadvantaged youth in Chicago, especially those who experience poverty, neighborhoods with high unemployment, poor educational achievement, racial discrimination, disabilities, and involvement with the courts, these programs offer a promise of progressive achievement and ease their transition into the workforce.

Although employers can make unique contributions to the preparation of young people for work, they are seldom participants in research about successful adolescent transitions to the workforce. Since 2001, Chapin Hall Center for Children has explored the policies and practices intended to help prepare Chicago's youth for the workforce. During this time, we have spoken with many stakeholders, including policymakers, program administrators, employers, youth program providers, and educators. Through these conversations, we have observed an emphasis on the need for youth who lack resources and/or networks to participate in workforce preparation activities that occur in the workplace. These activities often are described as job shadowing, internships, and employment experience.

Through this study, we build on earlier Chapin Hall research on the topic of employer engagement in youth workforce preparation. Our interviews tell us that the different entities and stakeholders involved in bringing youth into the workplace do not share the same perspectives, expectations, strategies, and methods. Many well-intentioned employer and youth program partnerships and the policies that support them are working at cross-purposes. This paper

explores the critical disconnects that research participants, including employers and program providers, have encountered when engaging in youth workforce preparation activities.

Background

Chapin Hall undertook a 2-year study (in 2001-2003) of the policies and practices related to the preparation of youth for the workforce (Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2002; Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2003). The goal of this research was to better understand the options available to improve preparation of young people in the Chicago region, particularly urban youth facing heightened risk for school failure and little opportunity for workforce preparation. We began by reviewing local, state, and federal policies associated with preparing young people for work. Among our findings, we identified a need for research to understand how youth program providers and employers engage in strong youth workforce preparation partnerships and the challenges that may impede the development of such partnerships.

Based on interviews with employers, their partner youth program providers, and youth, we examined how, when, why, and to what degree employers should be involved with youth workforce preparation activities. The findings of these interviews are discussed in detail in the 2003 Chapin Hall working paper, *Preparing Youth for the Workforce: Exploring Employer Engagement in the Chicago Region* (Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2003). These findings include a description of topics useful for program operations, including a variety of employer-engagement activities; the motives and benefits employers and youth experience when engaging in youth workforce preparation activities; and the unique capital employers can contribute to preparing youth for the workforce.

Through this research, we also found that employers, employees, and young people often enter into youth workforce programs with insufficient information. Employers were challenged

by the complications associated with simultaneously running a business, participating in a youth program, conflicting organizational cultures between business and youth organizations, and concerns about adolescent behaviors. As a result, we found that employers who work with youth may discover that the needs of young people go beyond the capacity of the employer to address.

In this paper, we explore in more depth the challenges experienced when employers, youth program providers, and youth are engaged in youth workforce preparation activities. We conducted additional interviews in the fall of 2005 to expand our sample and explore additional research questions we believed would enhance the understanding of employer engagement in youth workforce preparation activities. The new research questions included the following:

1. What should employers and employees expect of themselves and of youth? What expectations are considered unreasonable?

2. How do employers address young people's needs that are not directly related to the workforce experience?

3. Do employer and program objectives, expectations, needs for support, and/or definitions of success vary? If so, what implications does this variation have for program development?

Our research also included further analysis of the motives for employer engagement and further exploration of the resources available to develop and sustain employer involvement.

Methods

The findings in this report are influenced by research interviews that Chapin Hall conducted during the spring of 2003, the first phase of our research on employer involvement, and additional research interviews conducted during the fall of 2005. In 2003, we interviewed representatives of twelve diverse and highly regarded workforce preparation programs with

strong employer involvement. These programs represented the kinds of activities that employers may engage in, such as mentoring, internships, job shadowing, and employment. During this phase, we interviewed thirty-four youth program providers, employers, and other partner organizations. We also conducted focus groups with a total of twenty youth.

In the fall of 2005, we interviewed twenty-four additional policy experts, employers, educators, and youth program providers. The 2005 participants reflected additional perspectives and experience, providing a more comprehensive representation of the sectors involved in working with youth and employers. We interviewed four policy experts in the field, seven employers (representing six companies/agencies), and thirteen program providers (representing seven youth programs). These interviews allowed us to test our 2003 findings and make new observations. Our overall goal was to collect the richest possible data from a wide range of informants over a longer period of time. All of our research and interviewees focus on the Chicago metropolitan area.

Interviews were summarized and transcribed verbatim and coded by a researcher and research assistant. Research summaries were used to develop an initial coding schema. Coding was to reflect not only surface content but also the meaning/context of the content and re-occurring themes. Coding also allowed us to tabulate the occurrences of certain forms of content to support our analysis.[1] We rely heavily on quotations from interviewees to provide further explanation.

Chapin Hall interviews and papers about employer engagement and youth workforce preparation developed prior to 2005 provided background information leading to the development of the questions and findings discussed in this report. Analysis of the earlier

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[1] Coding was performed using the qualitative software package Atlas.Ti.

interviews is used to inform the conclusions suggested here, as well.[2] A complete list of

interviewees who contributed to the 2003 and 2005 research is included in the Appendix.

How to Read This Report

This report provides a summary of the critical issues employers and youth program providers

experience when working to prepare youth for the workforce. We begin with a description of the

current context for engaging employers in youth workforce preparation, including recent

research findings, the policy environment, and a description of the stakeholders involved. We

then briefly describe the programs that connect youth with employers and the youth who

participate in them. We discuss the major findings of this research project in the context of the

disconnects and misalignments facing employers and youth program providers as they attempt to

teach youth about workforce preparation and provide youth with workplace experiences. Each

disconnect described here is related to the other. When appropriate, each section begins with a

short description of previous findings on the subject. Our discussion then moves quickly to the

connections and contradictions employers and youth program providers experience as they

participate in efforts to prepare youth for the workforce. We conclude this paper by exploring

how stakeholders may influence future work to engage employers in youth workforce

preparation programs.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Employer engagement in youth workforce preparation is rarely studied. In order to provide

context for this research, we rely on literature that presents findings about employer engagement

within more broadly focused studies, such as research about school-to-work programs, career

academies, and youth engagement in the labor market, as well as policy discussions about

preparing youth for work.

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[2] Due to Institutional Review Board (IRB) restrictions, we quote only the most recent interviewees (fall 2005).

The literature and policy discussions cited in this section provide context for the findings reported in this document. We highlight existing data that describe the need for employer engagement in youth workforce preparation. Then we describe research findings and policy discussions that explore the following:

- The extent to which employers are involved with youth

- What youth may gain from engaging with employers

- Why employer involvement with youth is different from employer involvement with adults

- Whether specific populations of youth may have greater need and/or derive greater benefit from interacting with employers

- The relationship between employers and the education system in preparing youth for the future

There is very little research that addresses demand for employer involvement in youth workforce preparation from a quantitative perspective. The youth unemployment rate is a common measurement tool that begins to describe youth interaction with employers. A study by Sum (2004) discusses bleak unemployment rates for youth living in Illinois and Chicago. He found that, in 2004, the annual national employment rate for 18- to 24- year-olds was 36.3 percent, the lowest since 1948, when the federal government began compiling employment data. In more detailed analysis of employment rates, he found that teens in Illinois, especially teens without a high school diploma, urban teens, and African American teens, are unlikely to be employed. In 2003, fewer than one of every three teen-age high school dropouts in Illinois were working. Teens living in the suburbs of Chicago were twice as likely to be employed (39%) as teens living in Chicago (19%), and only one in ten African American teens in Chicago was

employed in 2004 (Sum, 2004). These data lead us to believe that teens who have low levels of educational attainment, teens in Chicago, and teens who are African American are finding little opportunity for engagement with employers through participation in the labor market.

Research studies that measure the number of employers who engage with youth or programs that offer activities to engage with employers indicate a need for employer engagement, although some studies are now out of date. For example, in 1998, Capelli and others found that 26 percent of all U.S. firms employing twenty or more people participated in a school-to-work partnership, and 39 percent were participating in some form of work-based learning (Hughes & Bailey, 2001). Youth programs in Chicago also have provided some data that indicate the level of employer engagement. Chapin Hall Center for Children recently found that 52 percent of youth programs serving teens aged 14 to18 during out-of-school time provide activities that, based on the description of the activity, require employer engagement (Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2006).

Although there are few quantitative data that point to the demand for employer involvement, existing policy discussions and qualitative research do suggest a need for employer engagement with youth to enhance the transition into the workforce. The Chicago Jobs Council recently recommended that the City of Chicago continue to expand and improve KidStart, Chicago's summer jobs program for youth (Smith, 2005). The recommendation indicates recognition that work experience and connections with employers are valuable opportunities for workplace preparation during adolescence.

In a longitudinal, randomized controlled field trial of nine career academies, researchers at Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) found that employer partnerships with career academies provided students with a much broader array of career awareness and

development experiences both in and outside of school (Kemple & Scott-Clayton, 2004).

According to the researchers, youth in the career academy were more likely, as students, to be

working in higher quality jobs during their work-based learning experiences. Youth could then

parlay these experiences in high school into higher quality job networks and use them as

leverage to obtain better jobs. Ultimately, the study found that enrollment in the career

academies had a long-term, sustained impact on the employment and earnings of young people

(Kemple & Scott-Clayton, 2004). In another study, partnerships with employers that created

links to job advancement were found to be the one common characteristic among programs that

demonstrated community college students' improvement of basic skills and course completion

rates (Kazis & Liebowitz, 2003). Finally, several authors have concluded that exposure to

employers through working part time (fewer than 15-20 hours per week) during high school has

lasting labor force benefits, such as higher wages (Carr & Wright, 1996; Ruhm, 1997).

In this paper, we discuss why employer engagement with youth is different from

employer engagement with adults. Youth need more supportive services and relationships and

different opportunities for development and growth than do adults, according to the literature on

this topic. Researchers participating in the MacArthur Foundation's Network on Transitions to

Adulthood describe developmental tasks that adolescents face as they transition to adulthood

(Settersen, 2006). Several of these dimensions of adolescent development affect the interactions

youth have with employers at the workplace. For example, the researchers describe the tension

between teens' need for autonomy and the development of their adult responsibilities to others.

The group also finds that a focus on developing adult independence may not be advantageous to

youth, especially marginalized groups or vulnerable populations who may benefit more from

interdependence in relationships to help them navigate uncertain environments and activate

networks. Finally, youth are in the process of active exploration and formation of their identity, including exploring their ethnic identity, in their relationship to others (Settersten, 2006). This identity exploration may affect how youth transition into mainstream work cultures.

Evaluation research describes some programs with practices that accommodate and encourage adolescent development. Through MDRC's longitudinal evaluation of career academies, researchers found that program with positive effects derived from employers (1) include continuity with caring adults and (2) provide hands-on engaged experiential approaches to education and training (learning by doing) (Kemple & Scott-Clayton, 2004). Researchers have also found that programs that include work-based learning and internships with employers are different from typical after-school jobs because employers spend more time training youth and discussing possible career options (Hughes & Bailey, 2001). Traditional job training programs for adults that include youth have generally been found ineffective for youth because adult workforce preparation models do not include strategies that encourage the development youth need as they transition to adulthood (Donahoe & Tienda, 2000; Grubb, 1996; Pouncy, 2000; Settersten, 2006).

Although existing research finds that all youth can benefit from engagement with employers, the literature highlights particular benefits for specific populations of youth. Researchers have found that youth facing great challenges in preparing for work include African American males, youth who have not completed 2 years of postsecondary education, and youth from low-income communities. Young African American men face diminishing connections to the work world caused in part by a diminishing number of blue collar jobs and the number of African American men with criminal records, possibly increasing employer reluctance to hire them (Kemple & Scott-Clayton, 2004). These diminishing connections are observed through

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racial differences in employment rates during the teen years, which continue into adulthood (Gardecki, 2001).

Although there are fewer entry-level jobs for young workers and bleak employment prospects for those with less than 2 years of postsecondary education, researchers have found that youth who have not completed a college degree may improve their prospects by engaging with employers. MDRC has found that there are strong labor market returns to early work experience and on-the-job training with employers, even for those without college degrees (Kemple & Scott-Clayton, 2004). As a result of their research findings, Donahoe and Tienda also recommended program models, such as apprenticeships, that explicitly connect students with employers through high-quality jobs to prepare non-college-bound youth for work (Donahoe & Tienda, 2000).

As we will explore later in this paper, the education system is an important link between students and future employment. MDRC explains that trends in the youth labor market and the economy as a whole have pressed high schools to improve efforts to prepare students for work and higher education. Such efforts include school-to-work transition strategies that emphasize partnerships with employers and more combinations of postsecondary school and work, or ways to move between school and work to accommodate student preferences and economic conditions (Kemple & Scott-Clayton, 2004).

Specific populations of youth may be particularly affected by the relationship between employers and education systems. Rosenbaum has found that African American and female youth in particular are much more likely to get first jobs through school placements, which ultimately lead to vastly superior earning trajectories when compared with their peers (Rosenbaum, 2001). Norton Grubb also explains that the education and employer link during the

transition from school to employment is particularly important for non-college-bound youth because of the labor market's informal hiring practices and loosely structured career paths. However, he also finds that educational providers have little knowledge of specific jobs, hiring requirements, and promotions where students are placed. He suggests that incentives for education to be linked to employers are weak because school outcomes are not tied to employment (Grubb, 1996).

Although high schools do involve employers through education-to-career programs, the role of the education system in preparing youth for employment and the workforce remains ambiguous. For example, Congress failed to reauthorize the education system's school-to-work policy in 2001, and it later dramatically increased the emphasis on academic testing to measure school success. It is unclear whether any government system is charged with preparing high school-aged youth for the workforce. Through the passing of the Workforce Investment Act (1998) and its reauthorization (2003), Congress has consistently reduced the workforce development system's commitments to youth who are enrolled in school by reducing legislative emphasis and financial commitments to programs for in-school youth.

Who Are the Stakeholders?

As indicated in the preceding section about research and policy, the stakeholders involved in efforts to understand and encourage employer engagement in youth workforce preparation are many and exist within a variety of contexts. Throughout this report, we will refer to the two primary stakeholders whom we interviewed: youth program providers and employers. The program providers we spoke with operate within the fields of workforce development and education and in community-based organizations. We spoke with a variety of employers representing for-profit and not-for-profit organizations of all sizes. It should be noted that the

stakeholders described here have varying levels of involvement in youth workforce preparation activities.

Stakeholders in youth programs that may prepare youth for the workforce exist within a variety of contexts. Youth program providers who work with youth to prepare them for the workforce maintain a strong commitment to engaging employers, often with few resources. These programs exist within city departments, community-based organizations, and high schools. Many government program administrators and political leaders have demonstrated a commitment to developing relationships between youth programs and employers. Naturally, administrators of workforce development and children and youth policies and programs are invested in workforce development programs and in engaging employers. Efforts to engage employers in youth workforce preparation exists to varying degrees among educators. Although there is commitment to engaging employers in youth workforce preparation within the education system, it is often most evident within specific departments and programs such as Education to Careers. Administrators and programs working with the juvenile justice and disability systems are also involved in efforts to prepare youth for the workforce, however, they have fewer connections to mainstream programs and funds.

Among employers, those engaged in high-quality programs are among the greatest advocates for youth. Employers who are less involved with programs are less committed to maintaining or expanding what involvement they have. The employers we interviewed represent both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, large and small, and those who are highly invested and those with limited involvement.

Youth Workforce Preparation Programs and Participants

In Chicago, as in many other urban areas, there are major differences in program offerings for youth who are in school and those who are out of school. Program differences are generally dictated by education and workforce development policy requirements. However, the tensions we discuss in our findings are experienced universally by program providers and employers. These tensions may vary in intensity between programs that are rooted in different policies and contexts.

Programs that engage employers with in-school youth encompass employer involvement in teaching programs with an academic focus, supervising internships, mentoring, sponsoring after-school programs with career preparation goals, and/or employing youth. Types of employment vary. For example, youth may assist in administrative or clerical positions, provide help with special projects such as organizing an event, work with younger children, or work in concessions or janitorial positions. During-school and after-school programs range from approximately 10 weeks to 1 year in duration. Summer programs are frequently 6 to10 weeks long.

The strength of partnerships between employers and programs for in-school youth varies. Some program providers have very little contact with an employer or youth participant throughout the duration of a program. Others work more closely with employers to plan, problem solve, and provide youth with supportive services and relationships.

Programs for out-of-school youth emphasize basic academic skill development and/or job readiness skills and job placement. The programs are generally 2 to 3 months in duration. Jobs that youth are trained for and placed in include, but are not limited to, data entry, bank teller, introductory level technology, and health care positions. Employers are not expected to provide

youth with any sort of mentoring and may have little contact with program providers beyond issues related to job placement. Some programs for out-of-school youth do involve volunteer experiences for employers, such as mock interview sessions for youth, in addition to youth employment.

In this paper, we focus on programs that work with youth who, without assistance, may have difficulty connecting and engaging with employers. These youth primarily include disadvantaged youth who experience poverty and/or live in neighborhoods with little opportunity for employment, have low levels of educational achievement, who are African American or Hispanic, have been convicted of committing a crime, and/or have a disability.

We include programs for both in-school and out-of-school youth. Youth who participate in programs for in-school youth are generally younger (under age 18) and have varying levels of educational achievement. Although their families' economic status varies, many are poor. Race and ethnicity vary as well. Programs for out-of-school youth generally focus on an older adolescent population (between the ages of 16 and 21) who may have dropped out of high school and/or do not have the academic skills that employers desire. The youth who participate in these programs are generally very poor and many face extreme hardship. The vast majority of youth who participate in the out-of-school programs that we spoke with are African American or Hispanic.

FINDINGS

Our analysis of the interviews highlighted a number of disconnects or misalignments in employers' and providers' perspectives about their experiences. These disconnects are the focus of our findings and center around the degree to which youth and employers are prepared to engage with each other, whether youth with the greatest needs are likely to engage in workforce

preparation activities with employers, how race and culture influence employer engagement, and whether program efforts to bring employer engagement with youth to scale with demand are in alignment with employer motives to participate in these activities. Tensions surrounding the role of the education system are indicated throughout this section but are more fully explored in the conclusion of this paper.

Disadvantaged youth attempting to engage with employers through youth program providers may require supportive services in a variety of areas throughout their experience with employers, from education about workplace expectations to personal relationships. The employers and program providers we interviewed agreed that youth must be ready for the workplace, but the meaning of ready is unclear. Employers vary in their willingness to provide education about the workplace and to engage in supportive relationships with youth. As a result, program providers attempt to anticipate employers' interests by referring youth who are seen as job ready and viewed as already having personal relationships that are supportive.

Providers also have few expectations that employers will engage with youth on a personal level and give employers little information about how to meet the needs of youth, should they occur. As a result, youth who are most in need of workforce preparation training and opportunities to engage with employers, especially youth who are in their early teens, youth who are out of school, youth who are ex-offenders, and youth with disabilities, may experience much greater difficulty finding opportunities to engage with employers.

Race and ethnicity also seem to influence the youth-employer experience, although providers and employers discuss race and ethnicity in terms of expectations that youth adjust quickly to the cultural norms of the workplace. Further, in our interviews, conversations about

race and ethnicity frequently turned to discussions about economic and class differences and educational achievement.

Our final observation about disconnects within efforts to engage employers in youth workforce preparation activities draws on previous work about employer motives to participate (Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2002; Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2003). Through our exploration of the alignment between employer motives and efforts to expand employer involvement, we find that existing efforts to expand employer involvement may not match employer interests. As we will describe, current efforts to dramatically increase the number of for-profit employers engaged with youth may actually limit options to expand the quantity and quality of employer and youth engagement in youth workforce preparation activities.

To What Degree are Employers Willing to Engage with Teenagers?

Engaging employers in preparing adolescents for the workforce involves specific attention to the needs of adolescents that are unlike the needs of adults. In past research papers, we have highlighted many of the differences between adolescent and adult workforce preparation, such as the emphasis in adolescent workforce preparation on employer mentorship and transferable skills, integration of academic curricula, and creating multiple pathways or options for youth to connect work with education (Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2002; Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2003). Here we discuss our interviewees' impressions of youth readiness to participate in the workplace and the degree to which employers are willing or able to provide adolescents with the learning experiences and personal relationships they need to become better prepared for work.

Through our interviews, we found that youth program providers attempt to meet youths' needs for preparation for the workplace through providing supportive relationships and services including education about workplace readiness skills, academic tutoring, transportation, clothing,

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meal assistance, and personal counseling. Employers, however, were unaware of the services and relationships that the programs provide and therefore do not access help when it is needed. Employers who are unaware of the supportive services available to enhance their experience or to help youth become better prepared for the workplace are more likely to express a desire to work only with youth who do not need extra education about workforce readiness skills and/or supportive services.

Education about Basic Job Readiness Skills

All of the employers and program providers we interviewed discussed adolescent behavior and work readiness skills and their effects on employer engagement in preparing youth for the workforce. Although some employers are cognizant of adolescent needs, most wanted to work with youth who already possessed basic work readiness characteristics and needed little extra involvement from program providers. Employers claimed that their contribution lies in providing experience and reinforcing work skills, not teaching basic job-readiness skills. One employer stated:

> There are certain to me, certain sine qua nons, if you can't get here on time, if you can't be depended on to come and be here from the time we start to the time we finish, how can we depend on you to do the right thing from the time you are here until the time you leave. And, if we have to spend our whole time on those basics, then there is less time to spend on real skill development and less of an opportunity for you to feel like you aren't going to be at this entry level job for the rest of your life.

In a few cases, we spoke with employers who may become involved in providing coaching about employment and work-related skills. One employee described his conversation with a youth at his workplace as he said:

> You've got to start thinking about the appearance thing and what it says about you … and your own professionalism because that will have an impact on your ability to succeed and get ahead. You're clearly not a gangster; you [don't] want people to perceive the wrong things about you…. Helping them [the youth] to understand

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that whole dynamic, we did some work on nonverbal communication and verbal communication….That's something that we were much more explicit about with young people than our … permanent staff.

Among programs for out-of-school youth, there is an understanding that youth must be ready for employment in the same way as other employees. One program provider stated:

They [the employers] are going to hold our kids to high expectations. They are going to treat him or her the same way as everyone else. When it comes to dollars, they don't have time to nurture.

Programs working with employers and in-school youth also emphasize the importance of work readiness. A program provider told us:

We want to move kids into business experiences when they are ready, when they can serve as good ambassadors for the program. Our experience tells us that kids who show up late or not at all, inappropriately dressed, not knowing what they are there to do creates a bad experience for the [young people] and the employer. And there is a cumulative effect which drives people and business away from the [program].

Another program provider found that:

If an organization is inexperienced and isn't ready to deal with the lateness or whatever [adolescent behavior] is going on, it can be a really frustrating experience for them. There was one point where [an employer] called … and said, "We are going to fire them all today."

Some of the employers we spoke with recognize that the behaviors and work-readiness skills that adolescents may bring to the workplace are typical of developing adolescents and are willing to address them. One employer found:

There had to be times that we would have to do conflict resolution among several of them. Conflict resolution skills seemed to be lacking and there seemed at times even to be some heavy jealousies among them. Things that perhaps maybe in retrospect we might say that's pretty normal for that age group. I don't know if we have given enough time to remembering what it is like to have eight or nine young people in a room for several hours every day.

Other employers disagreed. One said:

I don't want a call when he doesn't have money to get on the bus. I don't want that call. We are not surrogate parents.

In an effort to address employer interest in working with youth who need little education about the workplace, some employers and program providers we interviewed created participation requirements that mandate workforce readiness. One program provider discussed the influence of youth participation requirements on successful engagement with employers:

We have to be careful when we are enrolling so that we try to maximize our successes and outcomes ... rather than just taking anybody because they qualify. You have to work with youth where they are at, and we have to meet our performance outcomes.

Relationships with Youth

Among the employers and program providers we interviewed, all agreed that a central element of youth workforce preparation programs is concern for adolescent development in the context of relationships between young people and concerned adults who are willing to help them. An employer described how supportive relationships between employers and youth are important to teaching adolescents:

Young people are pretty adept early on in relationships at figuring out who's legit and who's not … who cares about them and who doesn't. I think that once you establish that relationship with them where they feel like this person isn't going to hurt them, it becomes a lot easier to give feedback.

A program provider also emphasized how supportive relationships impact the adolescent learning experience:

We definitely depend on the worksites that want to mentor, want to give of their time, because really it's a brand-new experience for that kid.

Although employers are concerned that youth have adequate supportive services and relationships that accommodate and encourage adolescent development, our interviewees

did not agree about the degree to which employers should be involved. One employer

described providing additional coaching for youth:

> On Fridays they would have lunch together and have conversations with
> employees … [who, for example] could sit down and talk with them about how to
> manage money ... They did some work around talking about colleges.

Another employer described efforts to provide learning experiences that will help youth

better manage their personal decisions and, in turn, positively affect their work behaviors:

> You know I wouldn't call it a formal thing, but, with some of the students we did
> a little bit of budgeting, like budgeting 101. You know if you get paid every 2
> weeks and you're having trouble getting here, why don't you buy the 2-week bus
> pass? Don't buy a 1-week bus pass and then realize next week, oh I don't have
> enough money to get to work on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.... So helping
> people to understand how to make sure their money lasts until their next
> paycheck.

> However, other employers indicated that their willingness to help youth or assist youth in

accessing supportive services may be limited. One employer commented:

> Employers are concerned about hiring urban youth, believing that graduates are not
> work-ready ... Employers are concerned that youth are not coming to them with support.

Another employer said:

> There may be partnerships with somebody that is better positioned to provide that
> hands-on, touchy-feely, call me if you can't get to work…. We all have kids and
> stuff. But it is a different role in the world we are looking to fill.

> The program providers we interviewed had minimal expectations that employers help

youth beyond their need to learn basic work readiness skills. They did expect that employers

would conduct themselves appropriately with youth and follow up with the program if there

were a problem with the youth. As one program provider described:

> In that way there is an expectation that the employer should be fair and reasonable
> within their conduct, and if they cross the line and do anything that's not
> appropriate, we won't continue to work with them.

Our analysis of program provider interviews found that within the limits of their capacity,

youth program providers attempt to provide youth with supportive services. As a program

provider stated:

> There are always going to be different challenges that low-income youth come to
> the table with that require community supportive services to address. Ultimately,
> they are going to be just as good a worker as anybody else. But there is a need to
> have supportive services for organizations like us to continue to do what we do
> and have more resources to do it so we can give [youth] extra support, so that we
> don't have to say to the employer, "Hey, hire this person because they need help."

Some program providers also attempt to educate employers about the backgrounds of the youth

who participate in the programs. These efforts are useful to employers when they encounter the

effects of the challenges that youth face first-hand. One program provider described an employer

who participated in an orientation to the youth program:

> After the end of the summer … he pulled me aside and said that before he wasn't
> used to working with youth who come from different situations and have different
> barriers. And it really opened his eyes to see how these kids come from a different
> situation. He'd work with them on a daily basis. At first they wouldn't show up
> and they would yell at them, "Why aren't you showing up on time?" And then
> he'd find out the kids couldn't get into their house because, "My mom didn't drop
> me off," or "I was locked out until late at night." So, he said he learned from them
> that there needs to be more opportunities for youth to work in this setting and see
> there is something more outside of your own environment.

Unfortunately, the employers who work with the program providers we interviewed are

often unaware of additional supportive services that providers may offer. Employers generally do

not contact the youth programs when there are concerns about youth readiness for the workplace

or problems youth may present. Further, the largest youth programs that provide connections to

employers do not generally have the resources to provide many, if any, of these supportive

services. Believing there is a lack of resources and supportive services for youth, most of the

employers we interviewed prefer to work with youth who have little need for supportive

relationships with adults and youth who are unlikely to need additional supports or help beyond job readiness skill development.

Are Youth with the Greatest Needs Being Reached?

As described in the previous section, the majority of employers and youth program providers who participated in our research preferred to work with youth already possessing workplace readiness skills and a network of personal supports. One employer stated:

> We want great kids who will take advantage of an opportunity if they have it. These aren't honor roll students who are going to Brown. These are kids who, if they only had an opportunity, they would do something with it. And, the other way to look at is kids who may slip through the cracks. And, if they did, it wouldn't just be a tragedy for that kid, it would be a tragedy for all of us. That kid has so much potential, if the kid only had a social structure that can support advancement and support them to get an opportunity.

Through our interview analysis, we concluded that youth who possess workforce readiness skills, have involved parents, and are connected to a community generally experience success in their activities with employers, and that employers want to work with youth possessing these characteristics. We have also observed that employers are hesitant to engage with youth who experience greater challenges and need more support. However, many of the programs we spoke with were developed to encourage youth who face difficult challenges to prepare for the workforce and gain access to employers. In this section, we explore whether existing programs are well-suited to youth who face difficult obstacles and who may not be able to otherwise access employers.

Which Youth Are Employers Willing to Engage?

In this section, we explore our observation that youth selected to participate in activities with employers are those who program providers believe are prepared and ready to engage, who have involved parents, and who have achieved some connectedness within a community,

program, or school. In an effort to maintain relationships between employers and program providers and accommodate employer interests, the youth that program providers may select to engage with employers are more likely to be the youth who need access to a network of employers, but do not need additional help in preparing for the workplace or engagement with employers.

Prepared/Ready Youth

All of the employers we interviewed spoke of workforce readiness in terms of good manners, timeliness, appropriate dress, and willingness to volunteer. One employer said:

> Manners are really important…. Just being polite and knowing the basics of please and thank you.

Another employer said:

> They got here on time. Their work behaviors were stunning to me…. They said thank you very much and they were proper. They were very well mannered.

> The employers and program providers we interviewed also described youth who

are prepared to engage with employers as youth who have an awareness and knowledge of expectations in the workplace and possess such characteristics as responsibility and motivation. One employer commented:

> There were two or three of them I would have loved to have been able to hire right off the streets…. They had shown both a good attitude and a good aptitude for this kind of work.

> It should be noted that a good attitude and willingness to participate are such critical

characteristics that they may even trump such job-readiness skills as, "dressing for success." One employer stated:

> You know we had a couple of them that we just couldn't seem to get through to them. I mean to the point where it's like, "Do you want this job? Because if you do, you have to listen closely. You cannot wear your pants 10 inches below your waist. It just can't happen." "Well this is the way I dress." But there is the one

guy who has the cornrows and the little beads on the back of the head. He's got the oversized jacket. You look at him and you think, "How did we get this young guy in here?" Yet, when you talk to him, he's just really mild mannered, humble, good kid who volunteers and says, "If you've got something else, I don't mind. I don't like to be sitting around doing nothing … so if you've got extra work I'll do it."

Youth with Involved Parents

Our interviews with employers emphasized that the level of involvement among parents contributes to a positive experience between employers and youth. Although questions about parent involvement were not a part of the interview protocol, we found the majority of the employers and program providers we interviewed discussed parents and their level of involvement. Examples of efforts parents make to become informed and involved in their child's experience include telephoning programs to get more information about programs, attempting to communicate concerns about their children's experience, attempting to contact employers to find out more about their child's experience or progress, and calling employers if their child was sick or absent.

Employers have observed that youth with more involved parents are more prepared for working with employers:

> The young woman [an employee] who sat back there most of the summer with the young people said you could tell right away who had one parent, and who had two parents, who had no parents. It was just so clear. You know some of the skills, some of the support that young people had at home that others didn't. Some of the things that some just took for granted that others were clueless about. We had a parent who showed up here one day and said I want to make sure that my son's hours are what he says they have been because sometimes he's been coming home a little late. And I said, "A couple of times we had asked him to stay late. Has he communicated that with you?" "Well a couple times he did tell me that." So I mean they [the parents] even took an interest in it.

One employer provided an example of an effort she made to specifically involve parents:

I called all their mothers before the [outing with youth] and said I was picking them up and what time, and when I will get them home because they are 16. [At that age] I wouldn't let my kids go off on some field trip that I didn't know about.

Although creating opportunities to involve parents may place even more strain on already taxed program providers and require greater levels of involvement from employers, it may benefit all involved. One program provider, recognizing that parents add value to programs, spoke of plans to expand parent involvement:

Summer employment is a good way to get businesses some of that initial interest, but how do you work with young people and make it successful and meaningful. So we want to have an orientation that would include the employers, the family, and the parents.

Connected Youth

The employers told us that youth are referred through youth programs, educators, or social service agencies who know the youth are prepared to engage with employers, compared with those youth who do not have networks and connections. A personal or institutional connection gives employers confidence that the youth is acccountable to someone and will feel a responsibility and commitment to the employer. One employer stated:

We have set some criteria for these kids. It's not GPA. It is a great kid, and an adult to partner with us, whether it's a parent, legal guardian, or representative of that community. What I mean by that is you know, "Joe didn't show up, help us track Joe down." Or, "Joe is graduating from the program, we want you to come sit in the front row." [We want] someone in the community, I don't care who it is, [who] can vouch for them.

Some of these connections may be found in youth or family involvement in a community program, a teacher referring a child to a program or employer, or a youth linking with an employer in their own community. One program provider described the connections between programs and employers:

It's really the kids that had been going to the [program], they've showed some leadership throughout the year they are around…. This person has been a [program] kid. I know their mom. I know their cousins. So they'd be really good.

Another program provider said:

> My sense is that [the programs] are pulling in the kids they really know, the kids are at that [program] all the time and have really strong relationships with them that aid them. They have these relationships built in.

> Encouragingly, one program provider did recognize a need to expand the reach of their

programs to connect those who are not already connected.

> Whereas the kids in this area, they know about us. Maybe their parents come in for services or their brothers or sisters participated. So there is a huge word-of-mouth knowledge and we felt we needed to get out more … and spent a lot of time and energy developing some [new] pockets and even it out a bit and open the program up to as many kids as possible.

Which Youth Are Employers Reluctant to Engage?

Minimal understanding of workforce readiness skills, lack of parental involvement, and lack of connectedness pose even greater obstacles for youth who experience challenges to engaging with employers and in the workforce, such as the youngest youth, older youth who have dropped out of school, youth who are ex-offenders, and youth with disabilities. The employers and program providers described these youth as the youth who often need the most assistance preparing for the workplace. Yet they often are unable to build connections with programs and employers. Although the populations are discussed individually, the proceeding description does not represent a continuum of any kind.

The Youngest Adolescents

As we have discussed in past research (Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2003), employers have made it very clear that they do not want to engage younger teens (ages 14 and 15) in the workplace. Employers are concerned about youth work readiness skills and child labor laws. Our most recent research underscores this finding. One program provider related:

> The big gap was 14 and 15 year-olds. Everyone that was 16 or older had an interview and the majority of them were hired. The big number, the … kids that didn't get hired, were the 14 and 15 year-olds. It's hard to find employers that will take 14 and 15 year-olds. The ones that were eager to hire kids were really hesitant about 14 and 15 year-olds.

Although youth who are 14 and 15 years old may benefit from employment and/or internship experiences with employers, an unfortunate policy mismatch may leave 14 and 15 year-olds with minimal opportunities to engage with employers. Federal policy has emphasized the importance of engaging young teens with employers, emphasizing employment and internship experiences. However, our interviewees discussed the difficulty of providing employment for youth who are under age 16. Other methods to engage employers with this age group and other environments better suited to this age group where employers may be more protected are relatively unexplored.

Out-of-School Youth

Our interviewees find that youth who engage in programs for out-of-school youth (youth who have dropped out of school or youth who have a high school diploma or GED but few academic or workforce readiness skills) are considered particularly challenging to connect with employers. The programs that work with this population generally focus on employment as the primary type of involvement. However, youth in these programs may actually be less prepared to engage with employers than in-school youth. Although many out-of-school youth are older, they may have greater adjustments to make and more knowledge to gain about workplace expectations. They may be expected to have mastery of basic academic skills, but frequently do not. They are expected to possess work-readiness characteristics, but many have not had the opportunity to develop these characteristics. Because of the obstacles they have faced throughout their lives, out-of-school youth may be less likely than younger teens to meet employer expectations.

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Unfortunately, the out-of-school youth are rarely involved in programs in which program providers and employers partner to help youth as they adjust to new expectations.

All of the federally funded program providers we interviewed were particularly concerned about the tension between meeting youths' needs and adhering to short timelines enforced by policies that fund programs for out-of-school youth. Although workforce preparation programs for in-school youth may be offered throughout the school year, programs for out-of-school youth are required to increase basic skills among youth and then find them employment within a few months of enrollment. One provider stated:

> I could have a high school graduate, but when they are 20 and take an approved math or reading test they are coming out at 7th grade reading or something like that. You see a lot of that. So, they don't have the skills to compete in the job market, so our out-of-school contractors provide us a way to do training, say CNA training in the medical field. As just a very short-term 3 to 4 month let's get you in and do the GED, or upgrade basic skills if you have a high school diploma, and go through some type of occupational training to produce a certificate in hopes that even if it's not their life work, at least they are marketable.

Further, providers are concerned about youth readiness to engage with employers even if they do meet program-completion requirements.

> There are a lot of times that I can't source out the kids if I want to. Because I know that they are not ready. Another thing that bothers me is that they go through the 2 month certificate program, but that doesn't mean that they are ready. Just because they complete it-- they aren't ready. They still have the same personality and character, they still don't know how to present themselves.

Youth Who Are Ex-Offenders

Local and federal workforce development policies place an increasing emphasis on programs to connect youth ex-offenders to employment. However, employers are rarely willing to engage youth who have been convicted of crimes, and existing incentives appear to have little effect on motivating employers to hire them. In an effort to encourage youth to develop in a positive

direction, through seeking employment, adolescents are asked to expose themselves to continuous rejection by employers.

Interviewees told us that employers often believe that hiring youth who have been convicted of crimes may cause problems in the workplace and put employers in jeopardy. Therefore, program providers and youth rely on employers who provide "undesirable" jobs, or "jobs no one else wants," as a way to connect with employers and employment.

Occasionally, programs find employers who have a personal connection to the problems these youth face. A program provider said:

> Sometimes it takes an understanding HR person who may have been there. Several years ago we did have a contact with a regional at [employer name] and he had a few stores in Wrigleyville. He understood that if youth could get the skills and show some type of long-term history, then he could work with them. We knew that if we had a youth that really wanted to work, then he would take them on so they could get some experience and move on to something else. It sometimes takes someone who has been there to give them that kind of opportunity.

Although workforce policy has created incentives for program providers to enhance the scope of work being done to prepare youth ex-offenders for work and place them in jobs, there is little motivation for employers to provide jobs. According to the interviewees who discussed their concerns about youth who are ex-offenders, existing tax-credits do not provide the incentive necessary to increase the willingness of employers to hire youth with a record.

One partial solution that program providers have developed to increase youth success in engaging with employers is to educate youth about their arrests or convictions. This education is intended to develop knowledge among youth about what inquiries are relevant and legal in the hiring process and may increase the ability of some youth who have been arrested and/or convicted to find employment. One program provider stated:

Educating the youth who do have something on their background is important. A lot of youth who have been arrested don't know if they have been convicted…. We have a staff that works with the youth to see if they have a rap sheet, or if they can get an arrest expunged from their record. So, there is a big effort now to get people educated about expunging and sealing your records. What will show up, what won't, what is expungable, and educating people about what their record is for…. There are some employers that only ask about certain class convictions, which they [the youth] don't know. There is a lot of pressure for someone with something on their background. There is a lot of fear. We try to explain the benefits of being honest, letting us know what is on the record, so we don't send you somewhere that we know you won't be accepted. So we want to set up a level of trust so that we can service you better.

Youth who have committed crimes face challenges on the road to adulthood and must address the complications that have interfered with their successful navigation of adolescence.

One program provider said:

When you are talking about ex-offenders, on top of everything else that is standing against these young people they don't have good work experience, they don't have good family support ... and now they have two children and they are on food stamps and they are trying to step out and do those positive things so that they can get their GED and certificate, and where the rubber meets the road is that next step, getting a job.

The level of supportive services these youth require and the effort they must make to connect with employers and ultimately compensate for their errors are significant. One program provider spoke of the courage and tenacity that these youth must develop to even seek employment when he said:

To have a young person who is 18, who has a record, and to have them go out time and time again and say, "Yes, I have been convicted of a crime", and they know what the results are, that's one of the biggest challenges.

Youth with Disabilities

Although interviewees frequently raised concerns about connecting younger teens, older out-of-school youth, and youth who are ex-offenders with employers, few spoke of youth with disabilities. This is worthy of serious discussion. Only one program provider and one employer

discussed the challenges that youth with disabilities face in connecting with employers. Both

interviewees focused on the desire of young people with disabilities to engage with employers

and access employment. However, often after high school there are few chances to engage with

employers and little coordination to connect youth to employers. The program provider who

discussed challenges facing people with disabilities described one path students may take in their

efforts to engage with employers after they complete high school:

> Transition services are mandated by law under Individuals with Disabilities
> Education Act (IDEA), and in that law high school students with IEPs (Individual
> Education Plans) are supposed to start thinking about how to get connected into
> adult services, and the school is supposed to be actively involved in getting them
> connected. There has been a complete disconnect between when DRS
> [Department of Rehabilitation Services] comes into the IEP meetings, and when
> DRS is allowed to come into the IEP meetings or they aren't coming in at all.
> There is no bridge between the two of them. That's a problem…. Parents are not
> informed of their rights for moving [their child] into adult services…. There
> might be some students with intellectual or developmental disabilities … who
> sometimes get work experience through the STEP program here in Chicago
> schools, but after that finishes, the young people stay at home. Literally. They
> don't know about the services available.

The employer who discussed youth with disabilities indicated that finding employers to

work with disabled youth may be challenging but is still possible.

> Are these students going to be as productive [as others without disabilities]? In
> some ways, no. But you have to talk about a plan…. And the bottom line is
> society still has an obligation to do something, even legally…. Business can do
> something here. We create jobs and opportunities.

Efforts to engage youth with disabilities with employers may be infrequently discussed

by our interviewees because many simply have not had experience with this population of youth.

Although workforce policies address youth with disabilities within the context of all youth, the

state and local bureaucracies and programs that work with youth with disabilities may not be

well connected to the bureaucracies and programs that work with other youth. The employer

noted:

If the community and educational institutions can highlight that [disabilities] and can make it [addressing disabilities] part of their mission, then it's integrated and a part of what you have to do.

Disadvantaged youth possessing higher levels of readiness for employers and the workplace, parent involvement, and connections within their community are certainly deserving of engaging with employers in the workplace. However, we are left to question whether opportunities to establish connections within the workplace exist for adolescents who face greater obstacles. Although youth workforce preparation policies and programs are intended to prepare youth facing difficult challenges for engaging with employers and the future workforce, our findings suggest that the youth with the greatest needs for assistance connecting with youth workforce preparation programs and employers may be left behind.

Do Race and Culture Influence Employer Engagement?

The purpose of programs to engage youth with employers is to connect youth who face obstacles to workforce preparation such as inequity and poverty with experiences that may not be otherwise available. We observed that the overwhelming majority of youth who engage with the employers and program providers we interviewed are African American or Hispanic. However, there was little discussion in our interviews about the effect of racial and ethnic characteristics on the youth and employer experience. Throughout our research, we have been concerned about a disconnect between the race of youth in Chicago who participate in programs that connect them with employers and what seems to be a lack of willingness to acknowledge or discuss the possible effects of racial and ethnic differences on the youth and employer's experience.

In previous research, we explored how race and ethnicity affect the practice of engaging youth and employers through workforce preparation activities (Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2003). At that time, we found a discussion of race and ethnicity overshadowed by the discussion

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of poverty and access to quality education. Further, program providers emphasized that youth are expected to adapt to what they describe as mainstream work cultures and norms, but they were unwilling to openly discuss concerns about cultural differences that may relate to racial differences. However, employers who worked with youth of racial and ethnic backgrounds different from their own acknowledged a lack of language and a fear of discussing racial and ethnic issues that affected how they related to youth.

Through our recent interviews, we continued to explore the effects of race and ethnicity on employer engagement with youth and youth workforce preparation activities. When interviewees were asked about race and ethnicity directly, our findings were similar to our previous findings. When asked about the racial and ethnic background of the youth who participate in their program or job, all but one of the employers and program providers we interviewed described the youth with whom they work as primarily African American and Hispanic. During our interviews, we asked employers and program providers how their own race and ethnicity affected their experience and their interpretation of the experience of youth who participate in their program or workplace. Our interviewees found it difficult to comfortably discuss the effects of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds on the employer, youth, and provider experience. In fact, three interviewees said they did not experience any reactions to race and ethnicity and then refused to answer any additional questions about the subject. Six interviewees responded to our questions with reflections on their experiences with youth as challenges of poverty, class, and culture. Economic status, educational achievement, and knowledge of workplace expectations were frequently discussed by other interviewees in place of direct references to race or ethnicity.

We spoke with a few interviewees who were able to discuss efforts to address the possible effects of race and ethnicity on the youth and employer experience. One program provider has made a concerted effort to develop a curriculum to train staff who work with youth to better understand the effects of race and ethnicity on the youth's workplace experience, although the results of this training are still unknown. One employer described the challenges presented by racial differences between employer and youth and how he and his employees taught youth about the possible consequences of racial/ethnic differences:

> The challenge for us is to see that beyond that image, or to make sure that we could get beyond that image with young people and communicate or kind of validate who they are in spite of what might put you off at first. And to raise awareness among them that it is not enough to perceive yourself as you think you are being perceived, but you should get some feedback from others on how they are perceiving you because fairly or unfairly, those perceptions and then, ultimately at times in society, judgments are made based solely and exclusively on these superficial dynamics. But they can have a negative impact on the development of young people.

As in past research, the discussion of race and ethnicity during the interviews often turned to a discussion of the degree to which youth understand and accept cultural norms of the workplace. This conversation was frequently dominated by issues such as dressing appropriately and use of acceptable language and behaviors for the workplace. It is possible that educating youth about the cultural norms of the workplace without discussing race and ethnicity may be a missed opportunity to help youth as they grow and can even cause confusion among teens.

As mentioned in the "Current Context" section of this report, adolescents are developing a "racial identity" as they grow. Expectations that youth assimilate into a mainstream culture of work without a discussion of how one's racial/ethnic identity fits in that mainstream may actually be counter productive for developing adolescents as they develop a more mature identity and an understanding of their relationship to society. Further, the lack of discussion may cause

adolescents to believe that questions about the culture of the workplace are taboo, thereby

perpetuating fear of an open and honest conversation about race in the workplace. We hope that

future research about preparing adolescents for the workforce will continue to explore the effects

of race on the interactions between adolescents and those who engage with them.

Are Efforts to Expand Employer Engagement Aligned with Employer Motives?

In an effort to provide more opportunities for youth to engage with employers at the workplace,

all but one of the program providers we interviewed sought to dramatically increase the number

of employers willing to participate, particularly for-profit employers. Yet, progress to increase

the number of employers who engage with programs and youth is slow. According to our

interviewees, employers are hesitant to become involved or expand their existing involvement.

One provider stated:

> The vast majority of our employers are hesitant to hire youth. Just from our
> experience, I think that was always the challenge … so many employers are
> hesitant to hire college students, much less high school students. So, that's been
> the challenge: How do we really get these employers to see that they need to bring
> teens into the fold and give them meaningful work that gives them skills and gets
> them interested in the whole work world?

When we reflect on what employers have identified as their motives for engagement and

consider our findings about what employers are willing to provide, as well as the characteristics

of youth whom employers prefer to have in the workplace, we question whether efforts to

expand employer involvement are misaligned with employer goals and preferences.

Although a number of studies have investigated reasons why employers engage in school

and community partnerships to prepare youth for the workforce, a powerful, common motive

among employers has not been identified. In previous research, we explored employer

motivations in detail. These motivations focused on corporate responsibility and civic interest.

To a lesser degree, employers also discussed influences on employer motives including top

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management interests; broadening a company's pipeline of skilled workers, including racial and ethnic minority employees; employee interest in helping adolescents; and access to youth to help complete real work tasks. Our most recent conversations confirm that these motives do influence employer interest in participating. However, they may not be significant enough to meet the program and policy demand for employer engagement with youth.

During our analysis, we asked: "Why would corporate responsibility and civic interest be reasons for employers to participate in youth workforce initiatives rather than in other civic or philanthropic initiatives? Is employer willingness to engage in workforce preparation activities with youth driven by other, more fundamental reasons?" We found that employer motives to engage with youth workforce preparation initiatives are often influenced by both a combination of corporate mission, commitments to a local community, and public recognition.

All of the employers we interviewed explained that youth workforce preparation initiatives relate to their corporate mission. One employer stated:

> We are an organization that is mission-driven that focuses on supporting employment … and parents who work. So, the notion of working with young people on this was totally a part of what we do as an organization.

Other interviewees expressed a corporate interest in taking a wider philanthropic approach with company money and personnel time, rather than simply providing funds to programs. One employer said:

> I think that we do live in a society and a time when people want to help make a difference and I think a lot of people want to know, "How can I do it?"... Nothing ends an involvement more than a principal who just says, "Well give us a check." You know, that's not exactly what it's about. How do you do things and say hey, here's an opportunity.

These companies find that employer involvement in youth workforce preparation initiatives provides an opportunity for employees to engage in a philanthropic activity. As another employer described:

> We recognize that we've got a unique set of resources available to us so when we sponsor anything … we really leverage all that [employer name] is. It's our money, but it's also our people.

Other interviewees discussed their motivation to participate in youth workforce preparation activities as being rooted in corporate commitment to a local community. One employer stated:

> A bunch of local entities went to their local political people and then approached local employers. So the idea was really an interesting one because it got your attention in a way where as if [employer name] had gotten a letter from the Mayor saying would you employ four or five kids, [employer name] probably would have ripped it up.

One program provider we interviewed found:

> Most businesses want to be good corporate citizens and a lot of businesses are not large. They are smaller and maybe they don't have a large employee base … but they have a neighborhood presence. So participation in [the] program gives them a direct connection to what they know best. It's an easy and comfortable way for them to be engaged and something they see as really meaningful.

Many of our interviewees who claimed that alignment with corporate mission and commitment to a local community were primary motivators for their participation described an opportunity for public recognition of their civic commitment as an additional reason to engage in youth workforce preparation initiatives. This recognition may take several forms. First, employers may respond to requests from local decision makers, especially politicians, to become involved. In addition to simply requesting that an employer engage in the activity, decision makers offered some form of public recognition of the employer.

I think it's no small thing that you had [politician] provide the leadership. They even had a launch thing as a kick-off where everyone showed up. These people [employers] were trying to gain political favor.

The combination of public recognition and corporate interest or local commitment was most frequently cited as a motivator. One employer stated:

It's a priority of the administration so not only did it help us meet a business need, but it also helped us to fulfill other worthwhile, enlightened interests.

Another employer said:

I think doing the right thing helps your business…. You do what you like to do and you see the difference. You get attention.

Throughout our research, we found a strong emphasis among youth program providers and administrators on increasing the number of for-profit employers engaged in youth workforce preparation activities and observed their continuous struggle to engage these employers on a greater scale. We wonder if there is a possible mismatch between the motives of participating employers and program provider initiatives to engage large numbers of for-profit employers. It is possible that these efforts to increase the number of for-profit employers may not be the best strategy to increase employer involvement. One employer suggested:

I don't think the line is about for-profit and not-for-profit, it's about thinking through, making sure you have a role for the kids to play, and then providing good supports for them. That could happen in a law firm, a restaurant; it's really about thinking through how to make it matter in some way. To try to turn it into something more than just a J-O-B and something more to support kids who are just not doing well to be and to have some skills that they can use and transfer. Just the sense that there are some adults out there who are cheering for them.

Although our most recent research specifically set out to explore the influence of such public benefits as tax incentives on employer motivation, we found little reason to believe that these benefits motivate employers to engage in youth workforce preparation activities. Providers emphasized that the paperwork required to access federal government tax incentives for

employing disadvantaged youth is so complicated that they did not even discuss this incentive with employers. Further, the information required on the form may be unnecessary and give employers more information than they need about an employee. One provider summarized:

> For low-income youth, there is a tax credit. And that [paperwork] is very cumbersome … for example, they [the federal government] ask, "Is anyone else in the family receiving government assistance?" That's not the employer's business to know. And, it can set up a scenario where an employer may look down on an employee. It's information that is unnecessary…. It sets up a situation where there may be a lack of trust and discrimination based on finding out about the rest of their life.

Providers' future efforts to engage new employers may be more successful by better aligning the fit between the employer's mission and community investments, and youth workforce preparation.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, we described disconnects and misalignments within efforts to involve employers in preparing youth for the workforce. We found that youth and employers may not be sufficiently informed and prepared to engage with each other, especially when considering youth facing barriers such as disability and race. We also found that program and policy efforts to increase employer engagement to meet demand may not be in alignment with employers' interests in participating, and that there is little emphasis on alternative methods of engagement.

The disconnects and misalignments described here are presented through the voices of the employers and youth program providers, the stakeholder groups who participated in our interviews. However, we also based our ideas on past research interviews with a variety of stakeholders interested in connecting employers to initiatives to prepare youth for the workforce including policymakers, administrators of government programs, and political leaders in the

contexts of children and youth programming, workforce development, education, juvenile

justice, and disability.

In this final section, we suggest re-examining the roles of stakeholders in order to help

resolve the disconnects employers and youth program providers experience in their efforts to

prepare youth for future work. We explore alternative roles for employers in preparing youth for

work, the role of youth program providers in providing the critical assistance youth need to

prepare for work and to engage with employers, and the role of educators and the education

system in preparing youth for work. We conclude with observations about stakeholder

willingness to pursue the goal of preparing youth for the workforce, and how greater alignment

with this goal may better prepare disadvantaged youth for future participation in the workforce.

The Role of Employers

As we described in the previous section, one step toward increasing the number of employers

involved with youth workforce development and improving the quality of their experience is to

better align the fit between employer mission and community investment with youth workforce

preparation activities. Program efforts to engage both for-profit and not-for-profit employers

should carefully investigate employer's corporate goals and their relationship with preparing

youth for the workforce, as well as employer's community commitment and civic interests. As

discussed in our earlier research, involving employers whose motives are founded in an interest

in helping youth and the community may also increase the quality of engagement in youth

workforce preparation activities (Whalen, DeCoursey, Skyles, 2003).

Broadening the pool of youth workforce preparation activities that are available to

employers and youth may also expand the role of employers. Although employment is the most

common type of program activity employers provide through their partnerships with youth

providers, we find that increased opportunities for employers to engage in alternative workforce preparation activities may support efforts to increase the number of employers involved and the quality of the employer and youth experience. In addition to employment, employers may engage with youth through providing internships, job shadowing, and apprenticeships, and through participating in such in-school activities as mentoring, tutoring, and classroom education about the workplace and employment. One policy expert we interviewed suggested that employers and program providers become more involved in transitional jobs programs, where youth have a job coach and/or spend part of the program working with job coaches outside of work. Transitional job programs are at present relatively rare in the field of youth workforce preparation.

These activities may provide an opportunity for youth to gain hands-on experience that will help them in their transition to work. Further, youth who are not seen as possessing adequate job readiness skills and behaviors and youth who experience greater obstacles in connecting with employers, such as younger teens, out-of-school youth, youth with disabilities, and ex-offenders, may all benefit from alternative types of engagement with employers. Alternatives to employment also provide an opportunity for youth to engage with employers without expectations that the youth are job ready and with less required of the relationship between program providers and employers.

The Role of Youth Program Providers

Throughout this paper, we have explored the needs of disadvantaged youth who engage in youth workforce preparation programs and with employers. Program providers and employers have described the challenges they face in engaging with youth that can be attributed to the needs of disadvantaged youth, as well as to the unique needs of developing adolescents. Through

increased emphasis on meeting youth needs for supportive services and adapting program designs to address adolescent development, youth program providers may better influence youth and employers' experiences.

Some youth program providers play a dual role in their efforts to involve youth with employers. They provide supportive services to youth who are preparing to interact with employers or who are involved with employers, such as educating youth about engaging with employers; assistance with clothing, food, and transportation; and personal assistance through follow up and counseling. They also provide help to employers as they engage with youth through education about working with disadvantaged youth and assistance with problem-solving strategies. However, many employers do not know about the services they can access through youth program providers or about the services providers offer youth. Further, some youth providers do not have the resources to provide supportive services to youth or to employers.

Our interviews reveal that building supportive services into a youth workforce preparation program, educating employers about these services, and consistently communicating with employers about their availability may enhance both the youth and employer experience. Further, employers may be more likely to increase their commitment or involvement with youth if they have a greater awareness of the role of program providers in providing supportive services to youth. However, without funds for supportive services, program providers will find it difficult to increase employer commitment to youth workforce preparation activities.

In addition to increasing the supportive services available and educating employers about them, program providers may encourage the expansion of employer involvement by ensuring that youth receive the services they need before interacting with employers. As we have described throughout this paper, employers find that youth who are severely disadvantaged and

face great obstacles to engagement in the workforce based on their age and educational, court involvement, and disability status are less desirable to engage in the workplace. Providers may increase the quantity and quality of options available for youth to engage with employers by expanding their role in providing supportive services to youth and increasing education among employers. With increased access to support for youth, providers may find greater employer interest in involving severely challenged youth in employment experiences.

Adolescents are exploring ways in which they relate to others and developing an identity. Some of the program providers emphasized that attention to adolescent development has been critical to their program's success with engaging youth and important to enhancing their partnerships with employers. In addition, these programs encourage identity development by viewing workforce preparation as a continuum of experiences. This continuum does not begin with immediate involvement with employers. Rather, youth are encouraged to explore their interests with educators and program providers while learning about the behavioral expectations of the workplace. Only when youth have achieved greater knowledge of and practice in meeting workplace expectations coupled with an understanding of their own interests and identity are they connected to employers. This approach to providing workforce preparation experiences is intentional and requires great commitment from funders, program administrators, and program providers. Such an approach will likely increase commitment among employers to remain involved and perhaps expand their involvement and should be explored by program providers seeking to improve their engagement with youth and employers.

The Role of Education

There is a long-standing debate about the role of the public education system in preparing youth for the workforce. The employers and program providers who contributed to this research

consistently expressed grave concern about the level of academic preparation of the youth with

whom they worked and/or the role of the education system itself in preparing youth to engage

with employers and work. Throughout our research projects about youth workforce preparation,

we have found consistent discussion among employers and providers about their concern about

the level of academic skills among Chicago's youth, the role of the education system in

certifying that youth have acquired academic skills, and the role of the education system in

preparing youth for the workforce.

Employers are dissatisfied with what the public schools are doing for students who are

not considered topnotch. They were concerned that the academic expectations for Chicago youth

are too low, in comparison with those for youth from more affluent areas, such as the Chicago

suburbs. One employer stated:

> Maybe this is the soft underbelly of Chicago. You have the kids at the selective
> enrollment schools who are doing phenomenally and they are all really bright.
> Then, there's this story. What about your valedictorian from [name of school]
> who has an ACT score of 19? … I'm worried about those kids.

Program providers also note that youth who graduate from high school may not have

basic academic skills required by many employers.

> We have employers saying they are getting some young people without basic
> skills from their educational background and did graduate. And that's the scary
> part. We do, in our assessment process, assess each client before the workshop.
> Each client does have a basic reading and math assessment… The minimum level
> [for participation in the program] is 5.0 because they [the youth] have already
> graduated from high school. But it is disappointing when a high school graduate
> reads at a 5th grade level.

Employers clearly want to engage with youth who possess basic academic skills and

expect that high school graduates have achieved some higher level of academic preparation that

can be transferred into the workplace. However, as discussed in previous research (Whalen,

DeCoursey, Skyles, 2003), measures of high school achievement relate to academic

performance, not to student success transferring skills upon graduation. Such academic performance measures include graduation rates, ACT averages, and student performance on standardized tests. Although college attendance rates and/or labor market participation may be measured through student surveys, these measures are not used to judge high school or student performance.

It is outside the scope of this study to suggest specific roles for the education system in preparing the future workforce. Yet our interviews have led us to believe that employer satisfaction with the academic skill level among youth may play a strong role in their motivation to engage Chicago's youth in the workplace. In addition, increased clarity of the role of education system in preparing youth for the workforce will likely enhance initiatives to engage employers in preparing youth for the workforce.

Alignment with Workforce Preparation Goals

Of the program providers and educators that we interviewed who engage employers in workforce preparation activities with youth, more than one-half did not claim youth workforce preparation a primary objective of their program. Among these programs, goals included engaging youth in a developmental experience, keeping adolescents "off the streets" during the summer, and providing a learning experience where youth can gain skills. When asked directly about whether workforce preparation was a goal of the program, providers and educators distanced themselves, stating they were not workforce preparation programs. One after-school program provider said:

> Our tendency is to steer clear of those words [workforce development or preparation] as we discuss our program.

Providers' reluctance to identify themselves as programs that prepare youth for work may be one unintended consequence of an increasing tension between federal workforce development and education programs. The program providers, educators, and employers we interviewed

described their perception of a tension between federal workforce development and education programs. Interviewees observed that the pressure on high schools to meet federal academic benchmarks pushes struggling students out of school, rather than encouraging their academic improvement. At the same time, federal workforce programs are reducing funds for in-school youth programs and focusing on out-of-school youth. As one interviewee explains:

> There is an opinion in the DOL [Department of Labor] and in congress that these dollars [federal workforce development funds] should not be doing what public education should be doing. That these dollars need to focus primarily on out of school youth who did not have a successful experience in order to get them engaged and attached to the labor force.

Program providers expressed concern that workforce preparation programs may become the primary, alternative federal program for failed students. Interviewees were concerned with this changing role and expressed concern about achieving federal outcome measures.

> [Federally funded youth workforce development programs will] have to demonstrate that [youth] have increased at least two grade levels in at least one of the functional areas. [Programs] have to get [youth] to at least 9th grade plus. If it took [youth] eleven years of school to get to third grade, I don't know what kind of success we are going to have…We need to look at other ways to keep our kids because we are loosing them. We have to compete globally, we can't keep this up.

The youth program providers who were reluctant to identify as workforce development programs were concerned that public alignment with workforce development programs may infringe on their independence to develop goals and outcomes best suited for program participants. As one provider said:

> [The program's goal is] primarily engaging [youth] in something where they can gain some skills they can use in their future. But the primary goal is to engage. We are not focused on workforce development per-say…One of the biggest draws of our programs is working with professionals. That could be workforce development, I suppose.

Although we found a reluctance to identify with the federal workforce development system, all of the program providers, educators, and employers we interviewed acknowledged that they play an important role in helping youth develop the educational and developmental skills they need to engage with employers in the workplace. Leaders from the education, workforce development, and employment sectors may advance awareness of the role that each field plays in preparing youth for the workforce by encouraging a dialogue with one another about youth workforce preparation. This dialogue should include recognition of the individual contributions of each stakeholder group in preparing youth for the workforce and the development of strategies to bring their diverse perspectives together. Such conversation will likely build bridges in the field and strengthen motivations to prepare disadvantaged youth for successful futures.

Appendix

2003/2005 Interviewees

Reginald "Hats" Adams
Director of Community Affairs
Rush Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical
  Center

Robert D. Blackwell
CEO
Robert Blackwell Consulting

Greg Buseman
Consultant
Revere Group Inc.

Deborah Dahlen
Vice President for Institutional
  Advancement
Robert Morris College

Carlos De La Rosa
Assistant Director
Corporate Internship Program
Cristo Rey Jesuit High School

Philip J. Delahunt, Jr.
Project Manager
Earth Tech Inc.

Debra DiPasquale
Program Director
Bank One

Scott Diveney
Chicago East Central District Pharmacy
  Supervisor
Walgreens

Benjamin Dueholm
Program Officer
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan
  Chicago

Mary Dwyer
Civic and Community Development
LaSalle Bank

Jennifer Everett
Youth Program Manager
Lake County Workforce Board

Daniel L. Fabbri
Consultant
Robert Blackwell Consulting

Ivan Favila
Program Officer
UIC Minority Engineering Program

Daniel Friedman
Vice President
Food and Paper Supply Co.

Sharon Garcia
Program Coordinator
Marketing Career Path
Wells High School

Judy Gathman
Research Analyst
Lake County Workforce Board

John Gay
Rogers Park Yes Program
Chief of Staff
Representative Harry Osterman

Marisa Gonzales-Silverstein
Senior Director of Strategy and Planning
After School Matters

Vickie Gordon
Manager
Lake County Workforce Board

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Joanna Greene
Deputy Director
Workforce Board of Chicago

Lisa Hampton
Senior Policy Associate
Chicago Jobs Council

Katherine Harlow
Consultant
Walgreens

Demar Harris
Business Developer
Lake County Workforce Board

John Hess
Vice President
Employ America

Lee Hubbell
Senior Project Manager
Target Group Inc.

Armando H. Huezo
Mechanical Engineer
Phoenix Corp.

Khari Hunt
Director, Tech 37
City of Chicago
After School Matters

Heidi Intagliata
Assistant Director of Development,
    Philanthropy and Communication
Rush Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical
    Center

Davis Jenkins
Senior Fellow
UIC Great Cities Institute

Linda Kaiser
Executive Director
The Chicago Workforce Board

Preston Kendell
Executive Vice President
Cristo Rey Jesuit High School

Cheryl Lamm Gunn
Director of Community Relations
Quaker Oats Inc.

Jeff Leitner
Principal
Leitner Public Affairs

Peggy Luce
Vice President, Education and Workforce
The Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce

Christopher Luecke
Executive Director
Added Chance Program

Rene Luna
Team Leader
Access Living

Mary Ann Mallahan
Manager, Community Relations
Illinois Tool Works Foundation
Illinois Tool Works Inc.

Joyce Malyn-Smith
Center for Education, Employment, and
    Community
Educational Development Center

Carla J. Mayer
Internship Coordinator
Best Practices High School

Mary Ellen Messner
Director
KidStart
Chicago Department of Children and
    Youth Services

Ted O'Keefe
Director
311 City Services
City of Chicago

Katherine O'Sullivan
Director
PEPNet
National Youth Employment Coalition

David Osman
Associate Director
National Skills Standards Board

Rahnee Patrick
Team Leader
Access Living

Glenn Rathke
Consultant
Robert Blackwell Consulting

Gary Peter Rejebian
Vice President
Illinois Retail Merchants Association

Sheila Rogers
Program Coordinator
Career Links
Women Employed

Peter Saflund
Associate Director
National Workforce Center for Emerging
   Technologies

Michelle Salerno
Rush Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical
   Center

Chuck Schroeck
Senior Director
Education to Careers
Chicago Public Schools

Marc Schulman
President
Eli's Cheesecake Company

Dennis Sienko
President
Sienko & Associates

Gary Sutton
CEO
TEC Services Consulting Inc.

Eileen Sweeney
Director of Corporate and Foundation
   Philanthropic Relations
Motorola

Jeffrey Thielman
Executive Director
Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation

Renee Tucker
Program Director
Associated Colleges of Illinois

Credell Walls
Program Coordinator
Garfield Park Conservatory

Margo Weiser
Program Director
Bank One

Trina Whatley
Program Director
Jobs for Youth

Maria Whelan
President/CEO
Action for Children

David Wilcox
Senior Policy Advisor
National Skill Standards Board

Clifton Williams
Employer Services Director
Jobs for Youth

Virginia Witt
Executive Director
San Francisco Beacons Initiative

Jack Wuest
Executive Director
Alternative Schools Network

Meg Zimbeck
Former Welfare and Workforce Policy
    Specialist
The Illinois Caucus for Adolescent
    Health

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