

Year Up: Providing a pathway from poverty to a professional career for urban young adults

Gerald Chertavian

Gerald Chertavian is founder and CEO of Year Up. He delivered the annual IRP New Perspectives in Social Policy Seminar on October 3, 2012.

This article is based on the book entitled A Year Up: How a Pioneering Program Teaches Young Adults Real Skills for Real Jobs with Real Success and the 2012 to 2013 IRP New Perspectives in Social Policy Seminar. It is followed by a reaction by Carolyn Heinrich to the book, and a response to those comments by Gerald Chertavian.

*Lack of money gets less education
No jobs, and further degradation
It's getting devastatin'
And I walk both sides of the tracks
So who better to provide you the facts?*

—Bakari Barrett, *Year Up Graduate*

There are 6.7 million young adults ages 16 to 24 nationwide who are not employed or in school and who do not have more than a high school diploma. Many of these young adults face

multiple and significant challenges to entering the job market, even beyond national economic woes. They lack access to information about job openings as well as transportation and other resources that would allow them to work. Previous strategies to provide employment to this population have been largely unsuccessful; in the few cases where interventions resulted in a positive effect on employment and earnings, those gains generally disappeared over time.

There are many jobs requiring secondary education that go unfilled, while at the same time young adults with the potential to fill them lack access to the economic mainstream and to a way to obtain the needed skills. Year Up seeks to bridge this gap by providing a year of training to prepare low-income young adults for positions with good wages and career advancement opportunities in expanding fields. This is done using a high support, high expectation model that combines marketable job skills, stipends, internships, and college credits. We enhance students' professional and personal development in order to put these young adults on a viable path to economic self-sufficiency.

Skills gap

Figure 1 shows the percentage of 16- to 24 year-olds employed in the United States, from 1948 through 2011. After

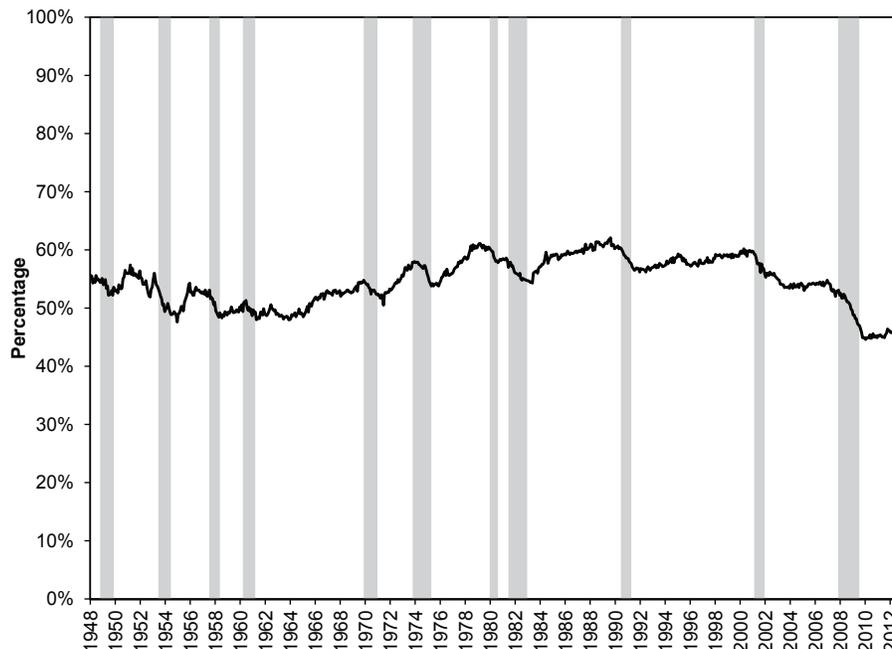


Figure 1. Percentage of 16- to 24 year-olds employed in the United States, 1948 to 2012.

Note: Grey bars reflect recessions.

Source: Seasonally adjusted employment-population ratio for 16- to 24-year-olds, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Recession periods are from the National Bureau of Economic Research.

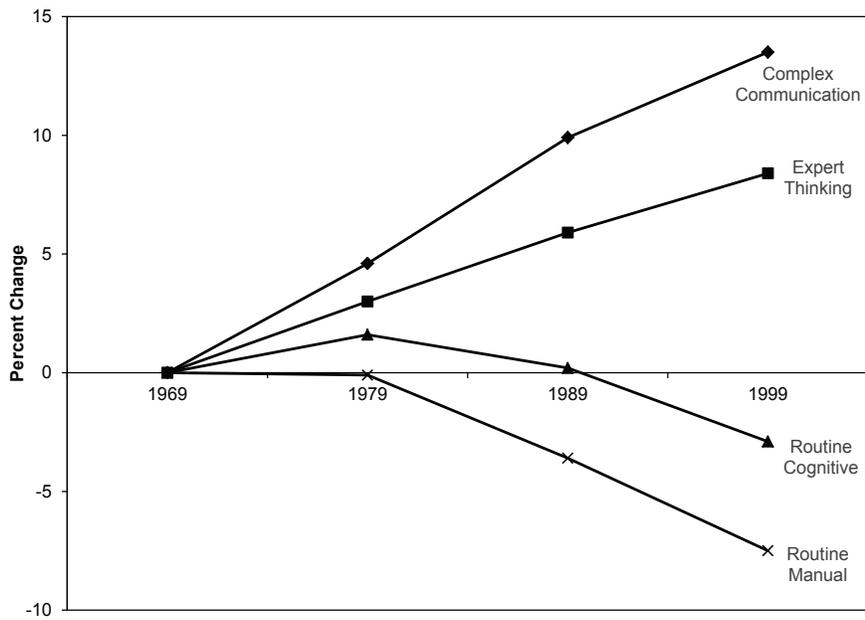


Figure 2. Changes in the tasks carried out by the American workforce, 1969 to 1999.

Source: Adapted from R. J. Murnane, “Preparing to Thrive in 21st Century America,” presentation to the Mobile Area Education Foundation, February 29, 2008.

a steep decline over the last decade, the employment rate has now leveled out at about 45 percent. Disconnected young adults, or “Opportunity Youth” as we prefer to call the population, represent untapped potential for our nation. It is estimated that the immediate taxpayer burden of all disconnected young adults in lost revenues and increased social services is \$93 billion, while the aggregate taxpayer burden of all disconnected young adults over their lives is \$1.6 trillion.¹ Despite these challenges, a majority of these young adults are optimistic that they can achieve their goals, and they accept responsibility for their own futures.²

As the United States shifts to a knowledge economy, our demand for skilled workers is growing. Figure 2 shows a divergence of tasks carried out by the U.S. workforce from 1969 to 1999. The demand for routine manual and cognitive tasks has greatly decreased, while that for complex communication and expert thinking has increased.³ This divergence will only continue, so in order to have a healthy economy, the United States must figure out how to provide workers with the needed skills.

Despite this increased demand for skilled workers, the supply is not keeping up. Even in a time of high unemployment, there are 3.7 million open job vacancies.⁴ A recent study suggests that shortages of workers with some college-level skills could increase to more than 14 million by 2020.⁵ Employers take longer to fill their job openings because applicants lack vital skills, such as communication, teamwork, professionalism, and critical thinking.

Year Up

Year Up was founded in 2001 in response to these challenges, in order to help close the gap between disconnected

young adults and open job vacancies by providing urban young adults with the skills, experience, and support that will empower them to reach their potential through professional careers and higher education. The goal is, in one year, to take an individual from poverty to a professional career.

Program model

The Year Up program model is illustrated in Figure 3. A rigorous admissions process is followed by five months of skills training. Students learn marketable skills in areas such as information technology, financial operations, and quality assurance. Training is also provided in professional skills, everything from dressing and communicating professionally to managing personal finances. Year Up partners with colleges, allowing students to earn college credit for the satisfactory completion of classes. Students spend the next six months in full-time internships, applying their new skills with Year Up’s corporate partners. Each site graduates two classes a year; when one class of students begins their internships, a new class begins the training phase.

All new students sign a performance contract agreeing to adhere to rigorous requirements including high attendance rates, punctuality, professional dress, and completion of assignments. A weekly stipend paid during both the classroom and internship phases of the program is tied to the performance contract; infractions of the contract requirements result in the loss of a portion of the week’s stipend. Students who repeatedly fail to meet expectations effectively “fire” themselves from the program.

High expectations are accompanied by an extensive support system; students are assigned staff advisors who check in as often as needed. Mentors from the business community



Figure 3. Year Up program model.

provide support, serve as role models, and provide networking opportunities. Mental health professionals are available on-site to help students cope with the persistent challenges they face in their daily lives. An essential component of this system is peer support; an orientation week is designed to create bonds that often last long after program completion, and students learn to rely on each other for support to complete the demanding program.

Year Up growth and results

In 2001, Year Up served 22 students in one site in Boston, Massachusetts. In 2013, Year Up will operate in 11 cities serving 1,900 students each year. The operating budget for 2012 was \$48 million, and we have over 250 corporate partners. Since its founding, Year Up has served over 6,000 young adults, and currently has 3,464 alumni.

Within four months of graduation, 85 percent of our alumni are employed, in school full time, or both. Those with full-time employment earn an average of \$15 per hour, or around \$30,000 per year. Ninety-five percent of Year Up interns met or exceeded corporate partner expectations. An outside evaluation of the program (described in detail in the following article) found that Year Up participants earned an average of 30 percent more than a control group, and were more likely to be employed in the professional industries targeted by the program.

What have we learned about what works?

In looking at why the Year Up model has been successful, and what we have learned about providing services to young adults, there are three lessons that stand out: have high expectations and provide high support; emphasize soft skills; and align technical training with employers' needs.

High expectations and high support

The combination of high expectations and high support guides everything we do. Participants are expected to behave as they would in corporate America, and are treated as such; the program provides a set of expectations, and the student decides whether or not they want to abide by them. If the student chooses not to do so, they fire themselves from the program because they are accountable for their own actions. We often tell students that “the most respect we can pay you is to expect a lot from you.”

Enforcing this is often extremely difficult to do. However, our staff understand the demands of the private sector and demonstrate to our students what will be expected when they enter the workforce. This professional support is augmented by social workers and clinical psychologists who provide essential assistance to students dealing with a wide range of issues including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, self-medication, and sexual abuse. Without this support in place when a crisis inevitably occurs, few students would be able to complete the program.

Emphasis on soft skills

As noted in the article by James Heckman, professional or “soft” skills are extremely important for success in the workplace. Training in these professional skills—referred to in the Year Up vernacular as *pro skills*—is integrated into both the curriculum and the program culture. For example, an instructor might interrupt a lesson to point out a student’s nonprofessional behavior during class, and use it as an opportunity to discuss what constitutes appropriate behavior. Staff members are trained in facilitation techniques, and know how to give feedback in a way that it will be heard and accepted by students. Students also receive direct instruction in a variety of professional skills including identifying and dealing with personality types and conflict behaviors, leadership, and team building. Students are taught business etiquette, including topics such as proper table manners for a business lunch, how to write thank-you notes, and appropriate body language.

Alignment with labor market

We are highly focused on providing the technical skill development that is required by businesses. We have a very close relationship with employers, surveying them twice during each internship period, and checking in with them every two weeks. We are responsive to feedback, continually adapting our curriculum to meet employer and industry needs. Ongoing communication with employers also makes us aware of specific skill gaps that corporations have identified.

There are several reasons why corporate partners agree to invest in Year Up. Foremost, we offer a “value proposition” that aligns well with the core business objectives of our corporate partners. Interns enter their workplace poised to develop the full range of skills that will ultimately make them valuable contributors and quality employees. This includes every detail of actually getting to their job on time and being prepared to work, including becoming familiar with the se-

curity procedure necessary to enter the building, and figuring out exactly how long it will take to commute to work from their home. In addition, corporate partners invest in our program because the internship is specifically structured to be low-risk and high-reward for employers; if the internship is unsuccessful, employers do not pay. Since Year Up depends on contributions from employers to operate, this provides a strong incentive to us to make sure we deliver.

As described above, a recent rigorous experimental evaluation has provided evidence that Year Up does deliver on our promises. Even James Heckman, who has argued that training programs aimed at older youth are often ineffective, and that limited resources should be invested in younger children, has noted that programs like Year Up that put an emphasis on soft skills have been finding success.⁶

How do we scale our effects?

While Year Up has certainly been effective at helping the young adults we have served find success in the workforce, we have to date been operating on a relatively small scale. The challenge and opportunity that we now face is to figure out how to expand our model to reach a greater number of people. The number of “disconnected youth” in the United States is large and growing, and our current reliance on private philanthropy restricts our growth.

In order to fully address the large and growing skills gap described above, direct service must be accompanied by systemic change. We believe that the current economic and political environments present a tremendous opportunity to effect such change, and that Year Up can make use of its increasing visibility and credibility on the national stage to assist in that effort.

Our strategy to expand and build on the success of Year Up has three parts: (1) to grow and strengthen our core model; (2) to develop a new “million person” model; and (3) to help create systems change.

Grow and strengthen the core

Although we recognize the need to develop a new model that can serve more people, we will of course continue to grow and strengthen our core model. We are adding programs in new cities, as well as expanding the program in current sites; by 2016, we expect to be serving 2,500 students each year. Growth in current sites is also helping us develop stronger ties to our local communities. We will continue to work on improving the program, and on ensuring the long-term success of our graduates. We are involved in the Innovative Strategies for Self-Sufficiency project (ISIS), a large-scale, rigorous evaluation of nine innovative career pathways programs across the country. ISIS is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families, and led by Abt Associates, a research and program implementation firm. Through this and other long-term evaluation tools, we will continue to prove and improve our program model.

Develop a million person model

At the same time, we are in the process of designing and piloting, in partnership with community colleges, alternative program models that can ultimately serve over one hundred thousand students each year. The colleges will provide the training, while we will provide needed academic, financial, social, and emotional support services to students, as well as internship placements. Through these efforts, we hope to increase graduation rates, and create more successful transitions into the labor market. By making use of the colleges’ existing infrastructure, we are able to reduce program costs to a level where they can be covered by Pell Grants and internship fees, and thus require no philanthropy. These features make this type of model easier to scale up, so that much greater numbers of students may be served. We currently have community college partnerships in all of the cities that host Year Up sites, including transferable credits for Year Up course work.

Create systems change

We are also working to change the way people think about urban young adults and how we, as a nation, can better prepare them for the 21st century economy. Building on the credibility of our core program, our efforts focus on influencing the three key areas of perception, practices, and policies. Thus, we are working first to improve the perception of urban young adults, so that they are seen as economic assets rather than social liabilities. As an example of that effort, the nonprofit Ad Council has recently agreed to produce a series of public service announcements to promote this concept. Second is changing employer practices around finding and developing talent. This means working with employers to identify the skills they really require and the credentials that can provide them, and, for example, changing the common requirement of a four-year degree. Third and finally, we are supporting public policies that increase the number of effective pathways to work for young adults. We will continue these efforts at both the national level and in the various metropolitan areas where our sites operate. Our growing corps of alumni will be critical allies as we pursue this strategy to broaden access to meaningful career pathways to all young adults. ■

¹C. R. Belfield, H. M. Levin, and R. Rosen, *The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth*, (Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012).

²J. M. Bridgeland and J. A. Milano, *Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America’s Forgotten Youth*, (Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises, January 2012).

³R. J. Murnane, “Preparing to Thrive in 21st Century America,” Presentation to the Mobile Area Education Foundation, February 29, 2008.

⁴Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary*, October 2012.

⁵A. Carnevale and D. M. Desrochers, “Standards for What? The Economic Roots of K-16 Reform,” Educational Testing Service, 2003.

⁶J. Heckman, Comments at Clinton Global Initiative Plenary Session, Chicago, IL, June 29, 2011.