



RESEARCH REPORT

Employer Engagement in Summer Youth Employment Programs

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Employer Engagement in Summer Youth Employment Programs

Employers are critical partners for summer youth employment programs (SYEPs): they provide job placements to young people across the country each summer. In recent years, a growing body of literature has shown that to provide high-quality, meaningful experiences for both youth and employers, SYEPs must engage more deeply with employers. This work has prompted some programs to expand their employer networks by engaging more private-sector employers who have traditionally been only marginally involved in SYEPs and to create deeper relationships with existing public-sector, nonprofit, and private-sector employers (Commonwealth Corporation 2013; JPMC 2017). This also includes asking employer partners to contribute more than just jobs and supervisory support for youth, such as by providing financial support and acting as community advocates for programs.

This strategy has been buoyed by research and general recognition of the importance of employer partnerships in building successful workforce development programs (Barnow and Spaulding 2015). For example, sector-based workforce programs and registered apprenticeship models have shown large increases in employment and earnings for participants (Maguire et al. 2010; Reed et al. 2011; Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board 2014). Employers can provide guidance to SYEPs about which occupations or sectors to target and what skills young people need to be successful, and they may hire youth into full-time positions (Spaulding and Martin-Caughey 2015). Larger private-sector employers may have more financial capacity than nonprofit or governmental agencies, which gives them the flexibility to make contributions to SYEPs.

Although recent literature on SYEPs has acknowledged the importance of employer engagement in creating meaningful summer experiences for youth, research has not extensively explored how these partnerships can be leveraged to create longer-term workforce pathways for youth. Historically, summer youth employment programs have struggled to demonstrate any effect on employment prospects for youth. Given that SYEPs have not yet been proven to increase wages or employment prospects beyond the initial summer of participation, uncovering promising ways to build bridges to employment may help to bring these outcomes to fruition (Valentine et al. 2017; Davis and Heller 2017).

To this end, this study addresses the following research questions:

- How can employer engagement create meaningful opportunities for youth, including longer-term opportunities for advancement in school and work?
- How do employers support work opportunities for youth through SYEPs?
- What are promising strategies for employer engagement and increasing employer involvement through SYEP programming?

In this report, we first describe why youth employment matters and how SYEPs have emerged as an intervention to the youth employment crisis (which we define in the next section). We then detail our research methods and the structure of the SYEP initiative in three cities: New Orleans, Philadelphia, and St. Louis. Next, we discuss the rationale for SYEP staff to engage employers in ways that provide foundational connections to the workforce. We then describe how employer involvement in SYEPs varies and strategies that SYEPs can use to build and strengthen partnerships with employers. Finally, we conclude with recommendations, discussing promising approaches and challenges to employer engagement and sustained involvement among employer partners. Together, these findings provide a roadmap for increasing employer engagement and involvement in SYEPs.

Youth Employment: Background and Context

The summer is a unique time for employment interventions for youth who are not in school. SYEPs have emerged as a popular workforce development strategy used by cities around the country to provide early work experiences to tens of thousands of youth each year.¹ SYEPs are one intervention attempting to address declining rates of labor force participation among youth (ages 16 to 24). These declining labor force participation rates have drawn attention to what has commonly been labeled the “youth employment crisis.”²

The US has seen declines in youths’ labor force participation rates since the 1970s. Though levels of youth employment have remained relatively stable since 2010, the overall youth labor force participation rate fell from 69.1 percent in 1979 to 55.5 percent in July 2018. For youth ages 16 to 19, the labor force participation rate fell even more, from 59.3 percent to 35.2 percent, during the same period.³ Although youth are more likely to be engaged in work during the summer, the decline in youth employment has been consistent even during summer months.⁴

Why Youth Employment Matters

Declines in youth employment rates have been largely driven by increases in school attendance, high school graduation, and increases in college enrollment, but persistently low rates of youth employment remain troublesome because evidence shows that early work experience can bolster long-term economic, academic, and health outcomes (Fein and Hamadyk 2018; Leos-Urbel 2014; Modestino 2017). Moreover, having a job between ages 16 and 18 is positively associated with job quality in adulthood, while unemployment in young adulthood is negatively associated with job quality⁵ in adulthood, suggesting that early work experience has a longer-term effect on socioeconomic mobility (Ross et al. 2018). The 4.5 million youth nationwide who are neither in school nor at work (often called “disconnected youth” or “opportunity youth”) are at higher risk than their peers for lower future earnings, lower educational attainment, poor health outcomes, and criminal justice involvement (Lewis and Gluskin 2018).

Research also shows that youth of color face disparities in accessing and benefiting from important early work opportunities. Youth of color and low-income youth are employed at significantly lower rates than their white and wealthier counterparts; and black, Latinx, and Native American youth are more likely to be disconnected and earn lower wages than their white and Asian peers (Lewis and Gluskin 2018; Spievack and Sick 2019). These disparities may exacerbate the already-limited prospects for economic security and stability faced by young people of color.

The Role of SYEPs as an Intervention to the Youth Employment Crisis

Summer youth employment programs have received increased focus since the rise of youth unemployment during the Great Recession. Although SYEPs are mostly funded through local workforce dollars, under the Obama administration, cities received an influx of federal youth workforce development funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and in 2016, 11 local workforce boards received money from the Summer Jobs and Beyond grants to support SYEPs.⁶ Moreover, the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act fueled investment in SYEPs by placing greater emphasis on supporting youth work experiences and serving out-of-school youth (Ross and Kazis 2016). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act also stresses greater involvement of employers in state and local workforce development planning activities and establishes new regulations to measure how well the public workforce system is meeting employers’ needs (Spaulding and Martin-Caughey 2015).

To date, SYEPs have not been proven to affect employment or earnings beyond the initial summer of participation (Davis and Heller 2017; Valentine et al. 2017). A major reason for this may be the short-term nature of the intervention: SYEPs typically last from five to seven weeks. However, research has found that well-designed SYEPs improve other important long-term outcomes, including criminal justice involvement (Gelber, Isen, and Kessler 2015; Heller 2014; Modestino 2017), mortality (Gelber, Isen, and Kessler 2015), and school attendance and graduation rates (Leos-Urbel 2014).

SYEPs may also fulfill multiple policy goals that address local challenges, such as facilitating entry into the local workforce; supporting the needs of low-income youth; offering constructive activities that promote positive behavior; and encouraging the development of “soft skills,” a broad set of personality traits and interpersonal skills that can help youth succeed in the workplace (Ross and Kazis 2016). Some research points to the role that SYEPs can play in preparing young people for the workforce by expanding their professional networks and contributing to the development of soft skills.

With the help of increased federal dollars, cities have worked to expand and restructure their SYEPs to focus on the development of work-readiness skills and provide additional supports and services for youth (Ross and Kazis 2016). Past participants have reported improvements in communication and responsibility, academic and career motivation, and work-readiness skills (Modestino 2017; Sachdev and McDonnell 2011). A growing body of evidence shows that these types of skills are a critical complement to academic and technical skills for long-term labor market success (Kautz et al. 2014).

Many of these positive effects, including crime reduction, soft skill development, and school attendance, are stronger for disadvantaged youth and youth of color, suggesting that summer jobs programs may be a key intervention for combating inequities (Heller 2014; Leos-Urbel 2014; Modestino 2017).

Methods

To answer the research questions, the research team collected qualitative data in three cities with summer youth employment programs: Philadelphia, New Orleans, and St. Louis. We identified cities with SYEPs that reflect geographic diversity and selected programs highlighted in the literature and in our interviews with experts as established programs that provide innovative services to youth.⁷

Before visiting each site, the research team conducted a review of the existing literature on SYEPs and youth employment more generally. The research team also interviewed nine subject-matter

experts to ground our fieldwork in an understanding of the latest research, practices, and programs for advancing youth development, including recent work on the efficacy of SYEP programming. We also used these interviews to gather background information on the evolution and implementation strengths and challenges that affect the delivery of SYEPs, including programs' strategies for employer engagement.

Program staff at each site identified interviewees for outreach with the guidance of the research team. Across site visits, the research team interviewed three types of respondents:

- **SYEP staff members** who oversee youth recruitment and job placement, program content development, strategic planning and goal setting, employer relationship management, or data and evaluation.
- **Community partners** who help provide early work experiences to youth and assist with community-wide strategizing around youth workforce development.
- **Employer partners** across diverse industries and of varying sizes who support the SYEP by hosting youth in the summer, providing funding, serving as advisors, or providing opportunities for employment beyond the SYEP. Respondents included
 - » seven employers from the private sector,
 - » two employers from the public sector, and
 - » seven employers from the nonprofit sector (e.g., colleges and social service organizations).
- **Past SYEP participants** (ages 18 to 24) who have participated in a SYEP in the past two years, have worked in diverse industries, or participated over several summers.

In total, the research team interviewed 9 program staff members, 2 community partners, and 16 employer partners.⁸ We also spoke with 17 total past SYEP participants during site visits to each city. In addition to qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups, the research team reviewed information developed by the three cities' SYEPs and other relevant sources, such as descriptive information found on city websites and in evaluation reports.

Our findings are limited: they are the perceptions of a small sample of SYEP program staff, employer partners, and past participants in three cities with SYEPs, and they should not be used to generalize about SYEPs as a whole or to draw conclusions about the efficacy of the existing programs in the three cities. Rather, these qualitative findings elevate the voices of various stakeholders involved in SYEPs and provide insights on how these programs can work with employer partners to improve longer-term impacts on the youth they serve.

Overview of SYEP Cities and Programs

In this section, we provide the demographics of the cities where the three SYEPs selected for the study are located and an overview of the three programs.

The cities' demographics provide important context for the goals and strategies employed by their SYEPs. Table 1 presents some demographic indicators for each of the three cities.

TABLE 1
Demographics of Study Sites

	Philadelphia	New Orleans	St. Louis	United States
Overall demographics				
<i>Total population</i>	1,580,683	388,182	314,867	325,719,128
<i>Race or ethnicity</i>				
White, non-Hispanic	42.1%	34.1%	45.9%	72.3%
Black, non-Hispanic	42.0%	59.8%	47.6%	12.7%
Hispanic or Latino	14.8%	5.5%	3.9%	18.1%
Asian, non-Hispanic	7.3%	3.0%	3.1%	5.6%
<i>Median household income</i>	\$40,649	\$38,721	\$38,664	\$57,652
Youth demographics				
<i>Percent of population ages 15–24</i>	13.5%	12.8%	13.0%	13.3%
<i>High school graduation rate</i>	83.3%	85.9%	85.7%	87.3%
<i>Youth unemployment rate</i>				
Ages 16–19	34.1%	27.9%	21.9%	20.7%
Ages 20–24	12.2%	16.5%	15.7%	11.6%
<i>Youth disconnection rate (ages 16–24)</i>	10.0%	14.1%	9.3%	11.7%

Source: High school graduation rate estimates come from the 2017 American Community Survey One-Year Estimates. Population and median household income estimates are from 2013–17 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates. Disconnection rates are from Burd-Sharps and Lewis (2018).

Notes: Data in the table present demographic data by city unless otherwise noted. The SYEP in New Orleans serves Orleans Parish; the SYEPs in Philadelphia and St. Louis serve youth within the city limits. Louisiana designates territorial divisions as “parishes,” which correspond to counties in other states. The youth disconnection rates refer to the metro area, not the city, because these data were not available at the city level. Youth disconnection rates tend to be substantially higher in central cities.

Although the three cities vary in size, youth constitute a similar proportion of the total population (approximately 13 percent) in each city, and the populations are racially diverse. Across all three cities, mean household income and the high school graduation rate are lower than the nationwide average. Finally, the Philadelphia metropolitan area has a higher teen unemployment rate (34.1 percent) than New Orleans (27.9 percent) or St. Louis (21.9 percent), and the New Orleans metropolitan area has a higher youth disconnection rate (14.1 percent) than the Philadelphia (10.0 percent) or St. Louis (9.3 percent) areas.

In this report, we focus on the summer youth employment program in each city that provides the most summer employment opportunities to youth. These are: **WorkReady Philadelphia** in Philadelphia, **NOLA Youth Works** in New Orleans,⁹ and **STL Youth Jobs** in St. Louis. In table 2, we show some characteristics of these SYEPs, highlighting key elements of each program’s goals, structure, programming, and supports.

The SYEPs in Philadelphia and St. Louis are run by nonprofit organizations; the New Orleans program is run out of the mayor’s office. The three SYEPs vary in size, from 600 annual participants in New Orleans to over 10,000 in Philadelphia. All three SYEPs provide tiered programming to youth based on their age and level of experience, with higher tiers providing more advanced work opportunities, and, in New Orleans and St. Louis, paying slightly higher wages and the opportunity to complete more hours of work. WorkReady Philadelphia and NOLA Youth Works are also piloting programs that tailor services for particularly vulnerable youth populations.

Each SYEP has a different model for paying the wages of participating youth. WorkReady Philadelphia, managed by Philadelphia Youth Network, convenes partners as part of a coordinated approach to preparing young people for future employment. Over 10,000 summer opportunities were provided to Philadelphia youth in 2018 through a variety of funding sources, including the private sector, which financially supported more than 1,200 paid work experiences. STL Youth Jobs will ask employers to contribute toward youths’ wages or administrative fees for the first time in summer 2019 but will not require that they do so. In the NOLA Youth Works program, youths’ wages are paid with funding from the mayor’s office.

The only eligibility requirements at all three sites are related to age and geographic location. None of the programs have income requirements. All three SYEPs place youth at employer sites based on the interest and experience that youth indicate on their program application. Youth are placed in a diverse array of positions, but most placements in all three cities are in the government or nonprofit sectors. A smaller (but growing) share of placements are in the private sector. To date, STL Youth Jobs and WorkReady Philadelphia have been most successful in placing youth in private-sector positions.

Finally, all three SYEPs have supports for both youth and employers intended to improve the summer experience for both parties. For youth, these supports may include professional development workshops, seasonal SYEP staff who provide individualized support (often called “job coaches” or “career coaches”), on-site employer supervisors, and other services to help them meet their needs. For employers, these supports may include an orientation, a point of contact within the SYEP, and toolkits for creating a positive summer experience for youth. The specific supports provided to youth and employers vary across programs based on the type of summer placement youth participate in.

TABLE 2

Characteristics of Summer Youth Employment Programs in Study Sites

	WorkReady Philadelphia	NOLA Youth Works	STL Youth Jobs
Total city population	1,580,683	388,182	314,867
Area of operation	Philadelphia	Orleans Parish	St. Louis
Operating organization	Philadelphia Youth Network	Mayor’s Office of Workforce Development	STL Youth Jobs
Goal	Citywide effort to address the skills gap and alleviate poverty and inequity; promotes self-efficacy, connects youth to caring adults, and helps youth build transferrable skills	Exposing youth to future education and career opportunities	Bridge the divide between the region’s youth and the growing skills gap in the workforce
Alignment with city workforce development goals	Aligned with “Fueling Philadelphia’s Talent Pipeline”, a citywide workforce development strategy designed to align workforce education and training to the needs of employers. This includes enabling 16,000 young people to participate annually in a high-quality work experience by 2020	Aligned with the Mayor’s Economic Opportunity Strategy, a comprehensive effort to connect disadvantaged jobseekers and businesses to opportunities	Aligned with city goals of addressing violent crime, re-engaging disconnected youth, and creating a local workforce development pipeline
Size of service population	10,000+ youth	600 youth	700 to 900 youth
Program length	6 weeks, 120 hours	5 weeks, 100–150 hours (based on tier)	8 weeks, 160 hours
Financing of placements	Private and public funds pay for and/or sponsor youth work opportunities	City funding	Private and public funds; for the program is suggesting that employers sponsor for first time this year
Eligibility requirements	Ages 14–24; lives in Philadelphia	Ages 16–21; resident of Orleans Parish	Ages 16–24; lives in target neighborhoods
Placement types	20% private sector, 37% nonprofit sector, 41% public sector (self-reported)	10% private sector, 30% nonprofit sector, 60% public sector	40% private sector, 35% nonprofit sector, 25% mix of public sector and other entities
Employer supports provided	Toolkits for interviewing, supervising, and creating meaningful summer experiences; orientation for site supervisors; dedicated staff member assigned to support the employer throughout the program; site visits during the program	One-hour orientation; biweekly job coach visits	One-hour orientation; biweekly job coach visits
Youth supports provided	Resources shared to assist with interview preparation and resume writing; youth orientation; weekly professional development seminars.	5 seasonal career coaches; 4-hour orientation; on-site employer supervisors	40 seasonal job coaches; biweekly job coach visits; 11 hours of professional development; workshops throughout summer; banking services

Why Employer Engagement?

Finding ways to deepen employer engagement in SYEPs strengthens overall programming and helps facilitate youths' connections to the workforce. Although SYEPs have traditionally focused on employer engagement as a way to increase their capacity to serve more youth, SYEP program staff at all three sites shared that they are beginning to think more intentionally about how their programs can help expose participants to skills critical for future success in the labor force and connect youth directly to longer-term education and career opportunities. Staff also described how they see deepening relationships with employers across the public, nonprofit, and private sectors as critical to achieving that goal.

This section describes the perspectives of program staff and youth participants on how partnerships with employers further the goals of their programs, including providing a foundation for future employment. These include providing youth with initial exposure to the world of work and links to the labor force, addressing issues of access for disadvantaged youth (particularly youth of color), and increasing program sustainability by providing additional funding to support SYEPs.

Building Foundational Connections to the Labor Force

Across all sites, program staff and past participants highlighted how the early work experience provided by SYEPs allows youth to develop employability skills, academic and professional aspirations, and an understanding of the demands of a workplace, and that these products provide a foundational connection to the labor force. SYEP staff acknowledged that direct connections to employment because of one short-term summer experience were rare and that full-time employment following the program is not and should not necessarily be the goal for all youth. Rather, the programs we visited are providing experiences that offer career awareness and exposure that help youth understand the education they need, the skills they need, and the requirements of a future career.

SYEP program staff discussed how engaging employers across a wide range of industries helps expose young people to different career paths that allow them to explore their interests and establish professional connections. As one past participant described, "This program was so important as a stepping stone for a first job. It gave me a different trajectory in terms of my pursuit of higher education." Another former participant explained, "This kind of experience forms your character, encourages higher education, and helps you learn what you do and don't like."

Program staff at all three sites emphasized the importance of SYEPs engaging employers to help youth establish connections to the workforce that may help them secure a job in the future. One SYEP staff member in Philadelphia shared, “If you’re not in a [summer] program that’s trying to connect you to something, you’re just out there in the job market with everyone else. From our perspective, a lot of those connections to longer-term opportunities happen if we hear about something that’s happening at the company or city level and tell [the employer] we have youth that would be a good fit.”

Further, most youth in each focus group reported benefitting from their summer employer supervisors, who wrote letters of recommendation for subsequent positions and served as a reference for future jobs.

Building Essential Skills for the Workplace

When participating in summer youth employment placements, youth are given time, space, and support to learn and be coached on the skills they need to be successful as they continue their employment and education. A staff member at STL Youth Jobs echoed this, describing how the experience of participating in summer youth employment allows youth to get “out of their comfort zone. They need someone to troubleshoot with them and help them think outside their bounds. That’s any teen.”

BOX 2

Youth Comments about the Value of Soft Skills Gained through Their SYEP Experience

“[Now] In college, having the time management and listening skills are helpful. The program helped me learn to prioritize my tasks.”

“I know how to behave in a professional environment even if it’s school. I could conduct an interview from what I’ve learned. I learned to not limit myself to what I’m comfortable with—I try new things to see if I’m good at it. I learned the importance of being on time and being precise with your time sheet.”

“At the beginning, we went to an orientation where we learned how to dress and interact with professionals. I still utilize the job etiquette techniques I learned.”

“Overall, the experience helped me to be more social. I got to see people from different areas and who had different personalities. I’ve learned to approach different people differently. It helped me learn how to focus.”

By partnering with employers, who know what youth need to succeed in the workforce, SYEPs can also help youth with little or no work experience gain soft skills that promote success. In interviews across sites, employers and program staff said that soft skills were the skills they found most lacking among youth and that are the most critical. Being in a workplace provides youth the opportunity to learn these skills, often for the first time.

In all three focus groups, past participants viewed their soft-skill development as one of the most important benefits they derived from the program (box 2). Program staff in all three cities also reported integrating feedback from employer partners about soft-skill gaps into the professional development they provide for youth to prepare them for success in their summer placements and beyond.

Helping Disadvantaged Youth Access Job Opportunities

All three SYEPs we visited serve primarily low-income youth of color, either because the program intentionally focuses on this population or because the majority of youth who apply to participate in the program are low-income youth of color. As invested members of the community, the SYEPs we visited were interested in building a more inclusive workforce that supports the success of young people of color.

For example, WorkReady Philadelphia explicitly aims to reduce poverty and inequity in the city. STL Youth Jobs recruits only from target neighborhoods, which are determined based on a combination of factors that include high poverty rates, high crime rates, low educational attainment, high unemployment rates, and a high density of the program's target age range. SYEP staff saw increasing engagement with employers as one way to better meet the needs of underserved populations and these broader goals.

Program staff talked about how participating in SYEPs helps employers erode their stereotypes about youth. One staff member stated that participation in SYEPs is part of some employers' attempt to increase equity and diversity at their companies, commenting that "[SYEP participation] is important for employers because all of the youth in St. Louis are part of the future of the city. That exposure is very important. [It is beneficial for an employer] to see people who don't look like you and don't think like you." Getting employers more involved with an SYEP program can help them think through their approach to investing in disadvantaged youth in their communities and how working with the youth they employ through the SYEP can be one way to address these barriers.

Summer jobs are particularly important for low-income youth who may not have access to the important professional networks that their higher-income peers do. In Philadelphia, an employer shared, “It’s the network that will look out for you and support you and help you find positions. Many people just don’t have someone to open that door.” A past participant echoed this sentiment saying, “What really motivated me is the networking opportunity—being exposed to professionals. And you can add it to your resume.” When employers are more engaged in SYEPs, they can play an important role in opening up doors to opportunities that many youth—particularly those from low-income communities—may have previously seen as out of reach.

Securing Additional Sources of Funding to Support SYEPs

One additional rationale for engaging employers in SYEPs is to promote program sustainability. Employer investment through cost sharing, sponsorships, and other forms of financial support allows a SYEP to create additional opportunities for youth, serve more youth, and develop local talent for the future workforce.

To help realize the goals of their programs—including expanding opportunities for youth to advance in school and in their professional careers—staff at all three SYEPs thought it important to increase private-sector engagement and investment. For example, STL Youth Jobs is working to grow the private donor pool and to have larger corporate employer partners contribute toward the cost of hosting youth in the summer time. They have grown their private donors from around 30 to 80 partners. For the first time in summer 2019, employers were asked when they signed up to participate to contribute toward the cost of hosting youth or toward the cost of administrative fees.

The Philadelphia Youth Network asks that employers that can financially support youth experiences as part of WorkReady Philadelphia pay SYEP participant wages. One staff member in Philadelphia described the importance of this financial investment to make sure employers have “skin in the game,” stating, “We want to match up what they’d like to get out of it with the experience we’d like to give youth.” One staff member shared that if an employer is interested in supporting the program but is unable to provide staff time for supervisory support or space for interns, they ask that the company “provide financial sponsorships for youth to pursue employment at other organizations that cannot afford to pay youths’ salaries.” Businesses that are interested in hosting youth but unable to financially support summer job opportunities must be a nonprofit or a small business employing between 1 and 50 employees to receive a subsidy.

NOLA Youth Works is currently not requesting that all host employers pay youth wages over the summer, but the organization has received corporate funding from the past three years to support the implementation of its SYEP, including wages for 22 youth. Youth Works will implement a fundraising campaign for 2020 as part of an effort to expand services to additional youth. Identifying sustainable funding streams for SYEP programming through the engagement of employers is one way that program staff can ensure that they can continue to create meaningful opportunities (discussed more in the Strategic Partnerships section).

Employer Involvement in SYEPs

An important way that employers can support youth in creating connections to longer-term career and education prospects is by providing the opportunity to participate in a summer job placement. In the three cities we visited, employers are involved with SYEPs at different levels of intensity. Program staff and employers described several ways that employers are making meaningful contributions to sustain SYEPs and provide high-quality experiences for youth. Each type of involvement contributes to program sustainability, connecting youth to the labor market and the potential for longer-term opportunities that increase access and equity.

Table 3 displays the varying levels of employer involvement¹⁰ and the common characteristics of each type of partnership. Employer partners can play multiple roles, serving as host partners, hands-on partners, and strategic or invested partners—these designations are not mutually exclusive.

TABLE 3
Common Characteristics of Different Types of Employer Partnerships with SYEPs

Tier 1: Host partner (most common)	Tier 2: Hands-on partner	Tier 3: Strategic or invested partner (least common)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hosts youth and provides supervisory support ▪ Reviews program curricula, helping to define the needs of local industry partners ▪ Maintains contact with SYEP site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Helps develop curriculum ▪ Provides mentorship opportunities for youth ▪ Provides supplemental training opportunities for youth ▪ Serves as a professional reference for youth following program completion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participates in cost sharing or leverages funds, including providing scholarships ▪ Helps with recruitment ▪ Champions or advocates for the program in the community and is willing to host events. ▪ Hires youth following program completion

Host Partners

The primary way employers partner with summer youth employment programs is by becoming a host partner. Host partners provide summer employment for youth where they can perform tasks relevant to the employer's industry and gain work experience.

A staff member from a retail industry employer that partners with STL Youth Jobs described her role as a supervisor, stating that in addition to providing more specific training related to work tasks, "I teach them general work skills, like how not to take it badly if someone is crabby." Employers provide summer experiences that can cultivate youths' career interests by building understanding of the training and education needed to be successful in the job market. A community partner in New Orleans echoed the need for this type of partnership, sharing, "We need better training providers that are preparing young people."

Being a supervisor requires a substantial time and resource commitment from employers. Host employer partners must commit a staff person to oversee the work of summer hires at the work site, work with the job coaches on any payroll issues, and provide feedback on participants' performance.

Program staff and employers shared that host partner employers play an important role in educating youth on industries with high demand for local talent. In doing so, employers build youth awareness of local opportunities that align with the occupations or sectors youth are interested in and help increase knowledge of viable options for employment.

Hands-On Partners

Hands-on employer partners are more engaged host partners because they also provide mentorship, assist with professional development curriculum for youth, and provide additional engagement and training opportunities for youth.

For example, a large health care insurer in Philadelphia that partners with WorkReady offers programming to summer youth participants that exposes them to professional development opportunities where they can interact with leadership at the company. The insurer provides opportunities to speak with company human resources professionals to discuss resume development, teach youth how to create a profile on LinkedIn, and offer other networking opportunities. The company also sponsors panel discussions with college students and opportunities for high school students to be mentored by their college peers. A staff member of this employer described that as part of the mentorship opportunity, "We talk about what it means to work—how to acclimate and be in

transition to the work environment. We have students talk about how to get into college and talk about what the college environment is like, such as how to transition from being a senior to a college freshman. We try to place mentors based on what colleges the high school student is interested in.”

The learning and development department at the company manages all the students involved in the program in partnership with their employer relations and public relations team. The company uses its staff to help recruit and onboard students each summer. Its team creates a professional development curriculum and works with the volunteer team to provide volunteer opportunities for students. Because the employer has a longstanding partnership with the SYEP, staff at the company know when students will be on site each summer. That eases the transition for both employers and youth participating in the experience because the services provided can be readily implemented each summer.

Hands-on employer partners may also provide other services to youth to assess their readiness for work and their interest in careers and to ensure a strong placement over the summer. One example of this model is a nonprofit employer partner in New Orleans that provides services to youth during the summer that extend beyond the services youth receive through their summer youth employment programming. The nonprofit uses its experience matching individuals with the services they need and provides additional career assessment once youth are on site to better understand their career interests and to design a summer experience at its site that is more tailored to individuals’ needs.

Their representative said, “In that first week, we find out what their career interests are, and we try to bring in young professionals to speak with them. We do an assessment for personal development. We do a health and wellness assessment and a civic engagement assessment. We try to play the role of guidance counselor. It’s important that they’re invested in their community and we want to know how they feel about that community. We want them to know that they matter.”

Finally, some hands-on employer partners act as mentors for youth. Very few employers we spoke with have formal mentorship supports built into their summer programming, but several youth in focus groups across cities mentioned having supervisors that helped them navigate the workplace, think about their futures, and, in some cases, kept in contact with them beyond the end of the summer. In St. Louis, an employer shared, “We are giving them access to a network they would never have. As they’re getting their next job, they can use us as a reference and a way to guide them. [Youth] having mentors is huge.”

Strategic Partners

Strategic, or “invested,” employer partners represent the deepest level of involvement and engagement with youth. Strategic SYEP partners participate in cost sharing or other funding (such as scholarships) to support SYEP programs, serve as champions and advocates for the program in the community, assist with recruitment, and hire youth after the program is completed. In this section, we describe each of these dimensions of strategic partnership in more detail. As described, employers providing funding for a program (paying youths’ wages as a host site or sponsoring youth participation over the summer) is one way to demonstrate their depth of engagement. Because of physical capacity or resource constraints, employers may be unable to serve as host partners supervising youth.

A nonprofit in St. Louis that serves as a strategic partner to the SYEP in that community is using a different approach to invest in their summer hires. Rather than contributing funding to the SYEP program to subsidize youth wages, they are investing directly in the youth they serve. The nonprofit hires students as summer youth employment workers to help rehabilitate houses, and youth receive equity in the home when it is sold: on top of their regular summer pay, students receive 30 percent of the profits when the house is sold toward their college funds. According to program staff, youth participants earn tens of thousands of dollars in scholarship proceeds as a result of their summer experience. The representative we spoke with stated, “I would suggest that other programs find some financial equity and ownership component. We try to center everything around the youth and how it will benefit them. We centered our mission around how we can help the students, and we find ways to.”

Another form of strategic partnership is serving as an employer champion. Employer champions serve as program advisors and help recruit other employers in their respective industries who may be unfamiliar with the program and encourage them to get involved. One employer in St. Louis described the importance of leveraging employer peer networks to support the program, stating, “When talking with employers, it’s about using networks. A STL Youth Jobs person making cold calls may not do it. But if Wells Fargo talks to Edward Jones, that will get more traction. You’re going to need to identify allies at those tiers and deploy them to make the pitches...It’s about us harnessing a network to make it inclusive and about opening doors and pushing against the closed-door networks.”

Finally, employers act as strategic partners by hiring youth for full or part-time work after they complete their SYEP experience. A representative for a locally owned group of restaurants in St. Louis described how the organization hosts 12 to 17 youth each summer, with 4 to 5 youth offered jobs at the end of the summer. She claims that one of the main benefits of partnering with the program is that it produces a trained individual at the end of the program who is then considered a candidate for hire. She

said, “It’s a good way to develop the local workforce and it’s part of our mission to have community partnerships and make sure we’re serving our community not just delicious food, but also actually serving the community. The [SYEP] is a great way to bring people in and train them to be ready for the world of work.”

Program staff interviewed for this study were unable to provide information about the number of participants who found employment at their summer youth site following participation in the SYEP. Although hiring is an important benefit for some students (and strategic partners across sites shared anecdotal evidence of this happening), there are several reasons that youth may not be hired at the end of their summer experience. Youth may not be hired because the program’s duration is so short; many youth do not participate in repeat summer placements at the same employer site; the skills or education required for regular employment are beyond what a student has achieved; the summer placement was not a good fit; or, youth decide to move on to college or other education programs following their summer experience.

Strategies for Building Partnerships with Employers

Given the many ways employers are connected to SYEPs, program staff must use different strategic approaches to engage them to successfully connect youth to opportunities that extend beyond the summer. Thus, it is important to understand what drives employers to be involved in SYEPs and how program staff engage and retain employers by making convincing pitches, providing supports, and collecting data that lead to program improvements.

Understanding Employer Motivations

Employer partners shared their perspectives on the motivations for employer involvement and their experiences participating in SYEPs, including the various ways that partnering with SYEPs provided value to their organizations. Employer motivations are likely to vary by SYEP site, industry sector, and the level of employer involvement. The motivations we list here reflect the most prominent themes we heard, but they are not intended to comprise every motivation employers may have for partnering with a program.

PROVIDES OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST IN THE COMMUNITY AND LOCAL YOUTH

Employers across all cities described that the primary motivation of participating in SYEP is giving back to the community and investing in their city. Program staff in St. Louis and Philadelphia also echoed this motivation. One staff member at STL Youth Jobs commented, “this is the main motivator for employer partners—being a mentor and doing something good for someone who needs help.”

Employers were also motivated by the opportunity to give back to youth by helping them build critical skills for the workplace, such as time management, communication, collaboration, goal setting, and conflict resolution. An employer in the restaurant industry in St. Louis shared that, “[The experiences youth have] teach essential skills about teamwork and kindness. They learn cash handling, how to solve problems, and how to speak to a variety of people. For youth in certain neighborhoods, they don’t get the exposure, but we have everyone coming in from all over the world, and they get to talk with all kinds of people. Those kinds of skills can’t be underestimated.”

Employers emphasized the development of soft skills and professionalism as being of primary importance for youth. An employer at a university in New Orleans expressed that, “[The summer job] really starts to prepare them for adulthood. [They learn] timeliness, responsibility for completion of projects, and communication and interpersonal skills. There is a lot of ‘adulting’ that happens. Let’s look at the [job] retention rates; many people don’t make it past their first year. For kids in high school that get to be in environments like this, kids are looked at as colleagues, learn how to balance things, and learn how to balance their schedules. With the development of foundational soft skills and professionalism, youth gain basic skills and self-concept to support their growth in future opportunities.”

BUILDS PIPELINES TO THE WORKFORCE

Employers are also motivated to participate in SYEPs because youth on-the-job training can help develop the future workforce. One employer in the restaurant industry shared that, “in the long run, we’ll have a better prepared workforce to do the executive function of jobs. I think we’re all in this community together and it’s our responsibility to show them this support.” Another private health care employer in Philadelphia shared that it is critical for large and medium-size companies to invest in and build their future workforce and that partnering with the SYEP is one way to do that: “It’s imperative for our talent pool. We want to know that we are [participating in] investments to bring in good talent.”

SYEPs also help youth plug into gainful employment opportunities and see that their work has value. A private employer partner in academia in New Orleans provided further insight on this point,

sharing, “We want to make sure they are aware of the [opportunities in the] field, (i.e., what is a librarian, what is an archivist)? We want to give them a robust opportunity.”

Program staff and employers see youth’s exposure to employment as a pivotal first step in thinking about their future and potential goals they’d like to set for their future. An employer at a major hospital system in Philadelphia described this motivation in more detail, describing both the value for youth and employers. “The experience is “setting a blueprint [for youth] on how to set future goals. It’s getting that exposure to what I can do... And for a young person to be able to see that early on is big. It is also about talent pipelining. Hopefully when [youth] graduate college, they will think about coming back and working for us...It is imperative for our talent pool.”

We heard this motivation from several employer partners, including a television news station affiliate in New Orleans whose staff member shared that, “It’s a good thing for students to get experience in a broadcast facility, and a good way for us to continue drawing people into this business,” particularly as the industry changes and more young people don’t see television broadcasting as a viable career path.

Further, access to short-term employees in an economic climate with low unemployment and a tightening labor market is a major benefit. According to one SYEP staff member in St. Louis, “The main complaint we get from employers is having trouble finding the talent that they need. The benefits [of SYEP participation] are exponential, being able to match people with jobs.”

ALLEVIATES THE ADMINISTRATIVE AND CAPACITY BURDEN OF RUNNING A STANDALONE SUMMER INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Another motivation for employers mentioned by program staff and employer partners is that SYEPs make it possible for small businesses to benefit from summer interns and the broader offerings of the SYEP without expending the financial resources to develop and run such programs on their own.

When asking employers to host youth, SYEP staff acknowledge that doing so is a big ask. “It’s a lot to ask of employers; it’s a lot of responsibility.” Some may have limited or no experience supervising youth. SYEP staff make a special effort to help small businesses given these constraints. SYEP staff support employers by providing employer orientations that outline expectations for hosting youth, describe points of contact for employer supervisors, and establish expectations about youth and their level of experience (because this may be a first job experience for some youth). Some sites have also developed employer toolkits and guides for hosting and supervising youth so that new partners can be trained efficiently as they join.

Small businesses also benefit from the overhead provided by the SYEP. SYEPs assist with job placement, lend payroll support, provide remediation support for youth facing employment challenges, and provide professional development support for youth. This organized support for hosting youth was considered invaluable by employers who might not have had the resources to manage hiring and hosting youth on their own. SYEP staff can help reduce businesses' risk when hosting youth because the program vets participants and identifies participants willing to work over the summer.

INVOLVES EMPLOYERS IN AN APPROACH THAT ADDRESSES INEQUITIES

One final motivation employers spoke about is that employer engagement is a method of addressing citywide or regional racial equity and inclusion goals that the business wants to support. Employers and program staff members we spoke with saw SYEPs as an important conduit for creating a more equitable environment for disadvantaged youth in the city. Specifically, they described how SYEPs can break down barriers for low-income youth and youth of color to access spaces, people, and resources that they have been historically excluded from, and they described how SYEPs provide youth with an employment experience where they can learn to be successful in professional spaces.

Employers shared that gaining broad support within their companies to speak about and make decisions about issues of race and poverty is challenging. But they also stated that advancing equity goals is imperative. A digital marketing employer in St. Louis shared that participating in an SYEP is opportunity to start making progress toward institutional goals, and that “employers need to explore their policies and how they can successfully engage youth through a program like this.”

Employers and SYEP staff were asked explicitly about the role SYEPs play in promoting equitable outcomes for youth in their city. In Philadelphia, WorkReady is one of many programs run by Philadelphia Youth Network aiming to reduce poverty and promote a more equitable environment in the city. As a major health care employer in Philadelphia stated, “It is not just about a job—it’s about ending poverty and enacting equity. That’s what the long-term goal should be. [Youth] can see what they can be, aspire to go to college, or be an apprentice somewhere.” One past participant echoed this sentiment, stating, “It was the beginning of me finding my voice as an African American woman in the workplace. It showed me the dynamics of the workplace for women and minorities. Seeing a woman in a position of power showed me it was possible.”

Making a Pitch That Aligns with Employer Motivations

SYEP staff we interviewed engage employers by tailoring their pitch to local industry and business representatives about why partnering with SYEPs is in the best interest of employers and youth. One community partner in New Orleans said, “It’s about giving [employers] the right message. You have to explain that it’s not just about doing good but showing employers that this does affect their bottom line. That includes communicating the cost of training new employees and turnover, and the role of SYEPs in easing onboarding and retention processes—all of which affects their bottom line.”

Other staff talked about communicating the value of the program for youth by helping them build soft skills, informing their career options and interests, expanding their professional networks, or providing them with bridges to later job opportunities. For employers motivated by the opportunity to give back to the community and assist local youth, the benefits to youth can be a selling point.

Providing Support to Employers

Program staff engage and retain employer partners by emphasizing the important supports that are available to youth through SYEP program participation, allowing youth to handle the demands of the workplace and reflect, learn, and make sound life decisions based on their employment over the summer.

To inform the professional development curriculum and supports that youth receive over the summer, SYEP staff request information from their employer partners about skills gaps and skill deficiencies from previous summer placements. They use this information to create programming that addresses the needs of youth who may not be learning practical workplace skills in school. SYEP job coaching staff also can help address issues if an employer makes it clear that a placement is not successful. Employers consider these supports a benefit because they help youth prepare to take on the commitments of a real-world job.

Job-coaching staff also check in regularly with employer partners on how summer placements are going and help provide solutions to address issues such as a lack of professionalism or behavior problems. Job coaches are also a resource for youth and help them navigate employment. One program staff member commented, “Job coaches are the person that help you navigate the process. Having someone walk alongside you and who you can talk to you about things is important.”

The job matching process is also a major resource that SYEPs provide and is a selling point when engaging employers. Youth describe their desired placement and industries of interest in the

application process, and program staff use youth surveys, career assessment tools, and interviews with youth to help facilitate a match at an employer site. One employer shared that it is advantageous for program staff to have experience in the industry in which they are placing youth, such as the service industry, so that they can better explain the demands of a particular position and ease youths' transition into the job placement. Further, although it is relatively rare, job coaches can quickly reassign youth from one employer site to another if they hear there are challenges with a placement.

Employers consider job coaching, job matching, and professional development supports to be very important because they help youth prepare for the commitments of a real-world job and reduce the burden on employers to provide this support.

Incorporating Employer Feedback to Inform Program Improvements

SYEP program staff seek to retain employer partners by improving the experience for them over time. All sites conduct an employer survey at the end of the summer to collect feedback on program experiences, though the nature of the survey varies by site. Several staff members across sites commented that they have used this feedback to make improvements to the program.

For example, STL Youth Jobs has used feedback from its employer surveys to adjust operations with the matching process, job coaching, and employer preparation. STL Youth Jobs has also tailored its employer application to capture information on employers' capacity and interest in hiring youth as full-time workers after completing the program. WorkReady Philadelphia is revamping its method for collecting employer feedback data as part of an end-of-summer survey.

SYEP program staff also gather and respond to informal employer feedback. In New Orleans and St. Louis, job coaches collect this feedback through regular on-site check-ins with employer sites, and in Philadelphia, program staff try to maintain open lines of communication with employer partners. For example, at WorkReady Philadelphia, youth and employers provided feedback that professional development coursework was taking time away from youth's experience at the job placement. In response, staff reduced the number of hours of professional development youth are required to participate in, particularly for prior SYEP participants.

Recommendations and Considerations

Based on the information shared across sites by SYEP program staff, employer and community partners, and past participants, we next describe promising approaches and challenges to engaging employers in SYEP programming in ways that improve and sustain SYEPs. This can help create bridges to longer-term job opportunities for youth. SYEPs seeking to advance their employer engagement strategies and create connections between their programs and the workforce may want to consider the following recommendations.

Explore Longer-Term Opportunities for Youth

One of the biggest challenges reported by program staff, employers, and youth is the short duration of the program over the summer. In New Orleans, for example, SYEP placements are only five weeks, and in no city we visited were placements longer than eight weeks. All three sites cited financial constraints as the main barrier to extending summer programming, but the length of students' summer break sets a limit on SYEP duration as well. However, because skills are built and developed over time, a single summer workforce intervention may not be long enough to produce lasting impacts on youth's longer-term labor market outcomes. Creating continuity in youth engagement with the workforce system may be key to enhancing the longer-term effects of summer programming for youth and for deepening employer involvement in SYEPs.

One participant in a focus group said about their experience, "I loved the program, but I wish it opened itself up to more opportunities [beyond] just the six weeks." Several employer partners reported youth are just getting familiar with the job when they leave and that it is difficult to build a personal and professional relationship with youth in such a short time. This can also affect how employers view the value of their involvement if they are not able to see work projects completed or significant improvement in the quality of youth's work over the summer. Sustained employer engagement could also be bolstered by year-round programming: all three sites shared that reengaging employers each summer after losing contact with them during the year can be difficult.

SYEPs can play several key roles in promoting continuous youth engagement with the workforce. Recognizing this, NOLA Youth Works offers workforce-related youth programming starting at age 16 and uses any leftover funds from its summer program to sponsor a small number of youth jobs in the fall. Philadelphia Youth Network (WorkReady Philadelphia's managing partner) is working to expand its existing year-round programming. In some cases, summer experiences offered as part of WorkReady

are extensions of school-year programs, enabling youth to work year-round, and additional school-year programs are offered that are not connected to summer jobs.

Other potential ways of increasing continuity include providing opportunities for youth to work part time during the school year with employers who would like to continue hosting youth during fall or spring. One way that SYEPs might be able to help youth establish longer-term placements over the summer or throughout the school year is through business sponsorship or by sharing the cost of youth's salaries with employers who want to remain involved in the program. However, many employers also expressed that budgets are tight, and funding is not available to help cover the cost of youth salaries.

In those cases, an alternative to extending the program in those cases might be to find ways to reinforce connections to initial employment experiences gained as part of participation in the SYEP. For example, one focus group participant recommended, “[Employers should] have a way for the student to stay connected...Even if it’s just a networking event, keeping the line of communication open would be good. Mentorship is important.” We heard from interviews with program staff that some job coaches at SYEPs have facilitated conversations between youth and their summer employers about the possibility of continuing to full-time employment, which can strengthen the program’s ability to place youth in longer-term job opportunities without requiring further financial investment.

Provide Robust Job Matching and Placement Support for Employers and Youth

Job matching and placement support is an important benefit of SYEP participation for both employers and youth. When youth are interested in their job and receive the necessary supports to succeed, the summer experience is smoother and more fruitful for everyone involved. Youth can explore their interests and navigate job- and life-related challenges, employers can work with people who are interested in their industry, and the SYEPs are better able to provide high-quality summer experiences. An important piece of a program’s approach to providing job matching and placement support is making sure the organization has the capacity to meet these needs. Job coaches help fill this capacity, fulfilling the broader role of employer engagement and matching youth interests with employer-requested skills.

In all three cities, however, some of the support staff in charge of employer engagement and support services work only seasonally because of resource limitations, and this can lead to large amounts of turnover between summers, large caseloads for staff, and more time needed at the beginning of each summer to build relationships with employer partners. To alleviate staff capacity challenges, SYEP staff should try to streamline and focus the matching process to ensure the goals, expectations, and interests of youth and employers match.

One approach that helps address the limited staff capacity issue includes using technology to perform tasks such as job matching. For example, for the first time this summer, STL Youth Jobs will use software to automate placement of youth into summer jobs by using data collected from youth and employers on interests, work experience, and skills. SYEPs should also track employer engagement and participation (as well as youth participation) over time to provide continuity for staff as turnover occurs.

Emphasize Business Value and Leverage Employers as “Champions”

Beyond emphasizing the value of SYEP participation for youth, an effective pitch for why an employer should participate in a SYEP should address employers’ unique workforce needs. SYEPs can bolster employers’ organizational goals in myriad ways, including relieving the administrative burden of employing youth, providing short-term labor, strengthening the talent pipeline to specific industries, and helping to achieve diversity and inclusion goals. SYEP staff members’ pitches should be tailored to the specific interests of each employer. Further, the pitch gains credibility and efficacy when employer “champions” promote the SYEP to other employers in their community.

However, program staff in all three cities we visited cited difficulty accessing prospective employer partners as a barrier to making a pitch in the first place. Leveraging employer champions also reduces the need for personal relationships between SYEP staff and many employers. If employers are willing to talk to their peers about participating in the program, SYEP staff turnover might decrease. For WorkReady Philadelphia and STL Youth Jobs, having employer partners who are well-respected in the community and who act as champions for the program has been very effective for establishing connections with large employers who might have otherwise been out of reach. Also, SYEPs may be wary of overburdening employer partners by asking them to serve as community advocates for the program. Building deep relationships with a few employer partners with larger capacity is a way to mitigate this challenge, and WorkReady Philadelphia and STL Youth Jobs have hosted events for employers in the community so their employer champions can reach large audiences more efficiently.

Collect Data for Continuous Improvement

Robust data collection and analysis can facilitate feedback mechanisms that promote employer retention and can more effectively link youth to longer-term job opportunities. Data from end-of-summer employer surveys allow program staff to make necessary adjustments to programming that keep partners satisfied and improve the experience for youth. All three sites we visited had some form of employer survey, but some were more robust than others. For example, when asked about the end-

of-program survey fielded by one SYEP site, employer partners suggested that it would be helpful to add more questions to cover topics relevant to program improvements rather than focusing on youth's behavior. Moreover, not all programs are using a database system to record survey responses that can be tracked and monitored over time.

Although efforts were still nascent in the three cities we visited, collecting information about participants' longer-term outcomes such as graduation rates, wages, and subsequent employment can help SYEPs better understand the effectiveness of their programming and make improvements that support youth outcomes. STL Youth Jobs is beginning to think about facilitating transitions to employment by collecting information from youth about their interest in a full-time job and from employers about their interest in hiring youth into full-time positions.

SYEP staff in the three cities we visited cited staff capacity as the major barrier to collecting and analyzing more detailed program data. However, being able to demonstrate results for participants over time each summer would allow evidence-based improvements to the program, help convince employers to participate, and allow programs to make a stronger case for investment from potential funders. Recognizing this, WorkReady Philadelphia is currently working to track participant outcomes.

Promote Focus on Equity

By being explicit about the role of SYEP programming in closing equity gaps when communicating with existing and potential employer partners, program staff can work with employers to open doors and change hiring practices in ways that promote labor-market success for low-income youth and youth of color. The SYEPs in Philadelphia and St. Louis have begun to do this by integrating an equity focus into their program's mission: Philadelphia Youth Network explicitly aims to alleviate poverty and inequity in the city through programs like WorkReady Philadelphia, and STL Youth Jobs recruits participants from specific neighborhoods with high shares of low-income black youth.

In all three cities we visited, some employers explicitly considered their SYEP participation as a way to address deeply rooted disparities in their communities. One digital marketing employer in St. Louis detailed the responsibility of local employers to address inequity, sharing that, "As leaders of companies, we have to change our policies and how we look at employment if we're going to change this issue. If you're not creating an inclusive environment, you'll never make room for people with issues because you don't want [your company] to fail. If that's the culture you're building—that you'll only hire the top person applying to your company—and don't have a balance, you can't make room for people who are struggling every day."

Promoting equity for youth through summer youth employment opportunities and engaging employers as part of a citywide solution is a promising approach because SYEPs and their partners can play a role in mitigating inequities. Racial and economic issues that came up during our interviews with staff and employers include racial and occupational segregation, intergenerational poverty, and inequity in access to housing and quality education opportunities through the public-school system. A cohesive workforce development strategy that addresses inequity and involves summer programs that serve youth and the employers that hire them is crucial for increasing a economic mobility of a city's residents.

Conclusion

SYEPs help advance youth employability skills and provide foundational experiences that can help youth advance toward meeting their future career goals. Employer partners benefit from the opportunity to give back to the community and train their future labor force. Diversifying and deepening employer engagement in the ways described in this report may be a key way to strengthen SYEPs. The experiences of the three cities discussed here serve as preliminary evidence upon which to build and expand approaches to employer engagement that facilitate longer-term job opportunities for youth. The recommendations provided in this report should be coupled with other efforts that address the local context of SYEPs to ensure that all youth, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income, can access important early work opportunities and receive a foundation for longer-term economic well-being.

Notes

- ¹ “Supporting Summer Youth Employment Programs,” Youth.Gov, accessed August 16, 2019, <https://youth.gov/feature-article/supporting-summer-youth-employment-programs>.
- ² “The Youth Employment Crisis,” the Rockefeller Foundation, accessed July 16, 2019, <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/the-youth-employment-crisis/>.
- ³ Lydia DePillis, “What’s Really Going On with Youth Unemployment,” CNN, August 17, 2018, [https://www-m.cnn.com/2018/08/17/us/trump-youth-unemployment/index.html](https://www.m.cnn.com/2018/08/17/us/trump-youth-unemployment/index.html); “US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Civilian Labor Force Participation Rate: 16 to 19 years,” LNS11300012, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, accessed July 16, 2019, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNS11300012#>.
- ⁴ “Employment and Unemployment among Youth Summary,” news release, Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 16, 2018, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.nr0.htm>.
- ⁵ Job quality is defined in this study according to an index that encompasses earnings, benefits, hours of work, and job satisfaction.
- ⁶ Workforce Investment,” National Conference of State Legislatures, accessed September 30, 2019, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/workforce-development-initiatives-in-the-american.aspx>; “Highlights of the Summer Jobs and Beyond: Career Pathways for Youth Demonstration Grants,” WorkforceGPS, accessed September 30, 2019, <https://youthsummerjobs.workforcegps.org/resources/2019/04/09/14/58/Highlights-of-the-Summer-Jobs-and-Beyond-Career-Pathways-for-Youth-Demonstration-Grants>.
- ⁷ We also sought to incorporate at least one SYEP located in a city that is actively involved in the LRNG initiative. Since 2014, the Urban Institute has been under contract with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to provide strategic guidance and support to the LRNG initiative, a digital badging and micro credentialing initiative aimed at expanding access to and improving out-of-school time learning opportunities for youth in cities to advance economic mobility. LRNG, which recently merged with Southern New Hampshire University, encourages youth across 11 partner cities (including Philadelphia) to earn digital badges on an online learning platform, while working closely with community-based organizations and employers in a local education ecosystem that connects learning and work. This study was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of that effort.
- ⁸ In a few cases, we spoke with multiple individuals at an employer partner site. Across 16 employer partners, we interviewed 20 people.
- ⁹ New Orleans is unique in that youth employment efforts are relatively decentralized. We made NOLA Youth Works the focus of our analysis in New Orleans because it is the program that is run out of the mayor’s office and has historically been regarded as the main SYEP in the city.
- ¹⁰ The classification of levels of employer involvement used in this report is adapted from the US Department of Labor’s framework describing how employers and colleges participated in partnerships together as part of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program. See “TAACCCT Is Deepening Employer Engagement,” US Department of Labor, accessed October 2, 2019, https://doleta.gov/taaccct/pdf/TAACCCT_Fact_Sheet_Employer_Engagement_10.21.2016.pdf.

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