



# Unpacking the Work of Work-Based Learning

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The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program

February 2021

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The **Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program** (EOP) advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. We recognize that race, gender, and place intersect with and intensify the challenge of economic inequality and we address these dynamics by advancing an inclusive vision of economic justice. For over 25 years, EOP has focused on expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity.

As a national partner to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Generation Work™ initiative, we are exploring new ways that workforce service providers are connecting young people—particularly young adults of color—with the knowledge, experience, and relationships necessary to succeed in today's job market. Partnerships in five communities — Cleveland, Ohio; Hartford, Connecticut; Indianapolis, Indiana; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Seattle, Washington — are engaged in a multiyear effort to develop, test, and scale cross-system strategies created by public and nonprofit education, training, and human service agencies to help ensure the following:

- Young adults have the education, skills, and connections with employers to access quality training and employment.
- Employers hire and invest in the career development of young adults.
- Practitioners and public agencies adopt, scale, and sustain a demand-driven young adult employment approach through their networks.

This report provides information about how practitioners in Generation Work communities are supporting Work-based learning (WBL) opportunities for young adults of color, including their work with employers to develop, structure, and support WBL.

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Pictured on the front cover: A student from the Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee's Youth Apprenticeship gets hands-on training.

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## Introduction

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*"To be honest, before I came to PowerCorpsPHL I wasn't really going down a good path. Sometimes your environment kind of sucks you in.... This program helped me see that I am a good person, I am a great professional, and me and my work matter."*

*– Young adult graduate of PowerCorpsPHL*

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**W**orkforce service providers in Generation Work communities are implementing a range of strategies to help connect young people — particularly those of color — with the knowledge, experiences, and relationships necessary to succeed in today's job market. Work-based learning (WBL) is one of the strategies that practitioners are pursuing. Through WBL, young adults are connected to occupation-based learning opportunities in the workplace. Young adults are not only gaining relevant work experiences. They are also building professional networks and demonstrating their abilities and value to employers. Moreover, research indicates that earlier experiences in the labor market, including WBL opportunities, contribute to improved employment outcomes in adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

These employment-related outcomes are especially important in today's pandemic economy. According to recent estimates, the number of US opportunity youth, those who are disconnected from school and work, has increased from a pre-pandemic low of 4.8 million to between 6 and 7 million.<sup>2</sup> Young adults of color remain among those most significantly

impacted by the COVID-19 recession.<sup>3</sup> Unemployment rates are near 20% for women and up to 25% for men among 16- to-24-year-old Black, Latinx, and mixed-race workers.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, because a high concentration of young adults worked in the retail and hospitality industries before the pandemic, there is great uncertainty whether there will be jobs for them to return to.<sup>5</sup>

Connecting young adults of color to WBL opportunities can catalyze the expansion of equitable economic opportunity in America. WBL opportunities can help young adults of color break out of the cycle of working in low-wage jobs and ensure that they attain the experience, education, credentials, and relationships necessary for stable and well-paying jobs. WBL opportunities can connect young adults of color to jobs in industries where they have been historically underrepresented. In doing so, WBL has the potential to ease employer biases around the hiring and career advancement of young adults of color.<sup>6</sup> And involvement with WBL programming can help employers attract, train, and retain the most diverse and fastest growing segment of the US labor pool.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ross, Martha, Kristen Anderson Moore, Kelly Murphy, Nicole Bateman, Alex DeMand, and Vanessa Sacks. "Pathways to high-quality jobs for young adults." Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings and Child Trends. October 2018.

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/pathways-to-high-quality-jobs-for-young-adults/>

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, Kristen. "A Decade Undone: Youth Disconnection in the Age of Coronavirus." New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council. June 10, 2020. <http://measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2020/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Rodgers III, William M., and Richard Freeman. "The COVID-19 Recession Is Hitting Young Workers—Especially Young Workers of Color—the Hardest." The Century Foundation, November 10, 2020. <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-covid-19-recession-is-hitting-young-workers-especially-young-workers-of-color-the-hardest/>

<sup>5</sup> Gould, Elise and Melat Kassa. "Young workers hit hard by the COVID-19 economy." Economic Policy Institute, October 14, 2020. <https://www.epi.org/publication/young-workers-covid-recession/>

<sup>6</sup> Quillian, Lincoln, Devah Pager, Arnfinn H. Midtbøen, and Ole Hexel. "Hiring Discrimination Against Black Americans Hasn't Declined in 25 Years." *Harvard Business Review*, October 11, 2017. <https://hbr.org/2017/10/hiring-discrimination-against-black-americans-hasnt-declined-in-25-years>

<sup>7</sup> Turner, Ani. "The Business Case for Racial Equity: A Strategy for Growth." W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Altarum, April 24, 2018. <https://altarum.org/RacialEquity2018>

## About This Report

In this research report, we describe the key features of WBL programs that predominantly serve young adults of color in Generation Work communities. We share practitioners' objectives for supporting WBL programming (as noted in the table below). We also describe how practitioners have tailored their programs to meet the needs of young adults of color, including their work with employers to develop,

structure, and support WBL opportunities. Through WBL programming in Generation Work communities, young adults are positioned to obtain entry-level employment in sectors with growth opportunities. Young adult participants develop a broader understanding of the types of employment opportunities available within a sector as well as the education and work requirements for advancement.

### Practitioners' Objectives for WBL Programming

Practitioners in Generation Work communities shared the following objectives for their WBL programs.

- Developing occupation-specific and essential work skills, such as leadership skills; ability to manage emotions, communicate, and solve problems; and respect for self and others.
- Offering relevant experience that allows young adults to apply the technical, academic, and foundational work skills learned in a classroom to a work setting.
- Providing early exposure to an occupation so that young adults can understand whether it is a good fit.
- Offering relevant work experience that positions young adults to secure a stable job.
- Fostering opportunities for young adults to demonstrate their abilities to an employer.
- Easing employer biases around hiring young adults, especially for young adults of color.
- Developing professional relationships and expanded social networks for young adults.

## Background of WBL Programs Profiled

Our research was informed through multiyear work with Generation Work partners and site visits to four organizations that develop and support WBL opportunities for young adults

Organization	WBL Program Description	Target Population	Occupation(s)
Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee (AJAC), Seattle	A 10-week pre-apprenticeship program that is designed to provide young adults with career exposure, work-readiness, and occupational skills training that connects to an apprenticeship in aerospace manufacturing. AJAC also offers next-step 2-5-year registered apprenticeships for young adults who complete the pre-apprenticeship training and find employment with an AJAC training agent.	Young adults age 16 to 24	Production technician Automation technician Industrial Maintenance Technician Machinist
District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund (The Training Fund), Philadelphia	Occupationally contextualized bridge classes, <sup>8</sup> pre-apprenticeship programs, and apprenticeship programs in health and human service career pathways.	Young adults age 17 to 24	Certified nurse aide Direct support professional Behavioral health technician Peer support specialist Childcare development associate
Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana, Indianapolis	A 14-week training course designed to prepare students for medical assistant positions, and 160 hours of externship experience at a major healthcare institution that operates a hospital and 10 community health clinics.	Individuals who have earned their high school diploma from The Excel Center, a free public high school for adults operated by Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana	Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA)
PowerCorpsPHL, Philadelphia	In collaboration with the City of Philadelphia, EducationWorks, Inc., and AmeriCorps, young adults participate in public sector employment. Programming includes a four-month Foundations phase, which focuses on building work-readiness skills and exploring career paths. Upon graduation, members are eligible for career-specific work experience in the following industries: green infrastructure, electric and solar, and urban forestry.	Young adults age 18 to 28 with a secondary credential	Green stormwater infrastructure technician Urban forester Solar technician

<sup>8</sup> Bridge classes are a strategy to integrate academic skill development with occupational education.

## The Work of Preparing Young Adults for WBL Opportunities

A range of factors influences how WBL opportunities are designed for young people. For example, some WBL programs are intentionally planned to be 'lighter touch,' where young adults are introduced to different occupations through employer site visits, informational interviews, and job shadowing. In other cases, WBL programming is designed to help young adults develop occupation-specific skills and prepare them for longer-term employment. Additionally, contextual factors such as funding, industry regulations, employer capacity, and economic conditions can influence the types of WBL opportunities available to young adults.

WBL experiences include:

- learning from employers who participate in programming as guest speakers or instructors,
- touring employer facilities,
- job shadowing,
- subsidized work experiences,
- summer employment,
- internships and externships,
- cooperative education,
- pre-apprenticeships, and
- apprenticeships.

**F**or the purposes of this research paper, we are not focusing on a particular kind of WBL experience. Instead, our research documents and describes, from a practitioner perspective, the “work” of cultivating, structuring, and supporting WBL opportunities for young adults. We first describe the pre-work of preparing young adults for a WBL experience at an employment site. Practitioners work with young adults to support the development of foundational and technical skills necessary for employment. WBL typically includes a comprehensive set of supports and services to help address a range of participants' needs, which practitioners note is especially important because many of their young adult participants reside in communities that have had long-time disinvestments in education, housing, transportation, and healthcare. Supports include addressing basic needs, as well as programming that provides a physically and emotionally safe environment and connection to caring adults.

This pre-work is critical and resource intensive, including staff time. Practitioners have also said that this work is often invisible to funders and policymakers, who provide resources to support the development of occupation-specific skills but typically ignore young adults' needs for more comprehensive and long-term services, such as employment retention support and connections to basic life necessities. Given this resource challenge, practitioners “braid” public, philanthropic, and private funding for pre-employment service provision. The result is not only substantial resources dedicated to fundraising, but huge and ongoing administrative burdens managing data collection and reporting requirements for various funding streams, as well as the added complexity of managing each funders' guidelines for allowable services, eligible participants, and length of service provisions.

In the following sections we describe key aspects of practitioners' work to prepare young adults in WBL programming.

## Connecting Students to Employers Early in Programming

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*"We have guest [employer] speakers that describe what we're going to be seeing at work. I like how it's real and raw. They tell us it's not easy, and not everyone can do this job, but it's important. We understand what the job requires on a regular basis."*

*– Young adult participant enrolled in the Behavioral Health program at the Training Fund*

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Early exposure to employers helps young adults gain a better understanding of the nature of an industry, the roles and responsibilities required for specific occupations, and whether it is a good fit for them in both the short- and long-term. Additionally, through this early engagement employers can better understand their role in supporting WBL and how WBL can be a viable strategy for developing a qualified workforce that meets their needs.

Ways that practitioners have incorporated employer connections into WBL programming include:

- hiring employers as instructors,
- arranging guest speaking opportunities,
- arranging student tours of employment facilities, and
- finding opportunities for employers to conduct informational and mock interviews with students.

Practitioners shared that they work to build employer connections with an eye towards finding a representative at a company who participants will identify with. Considerations include a variety of traits, such as age, gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as cultivating

connections with employer representatives who may not have followed a traditional career path. Finding these employer representatives is not a small task, but practitioners emphasize that the payoff is worth it. They shared that young adult participants who receive advice and instruction from employers often give it more weight than they do the guidance received from provider staff alone.

Moreover, hearing firsthand about an employer's experience and success in employment can be motivational for young adults. For example, at Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana's CCMA training program, employer guest speakers visit classes and describe the value of the medical assistant role in team-based care, share why it is important to have trained CCMA's, and describe the kinds of skills that students are expected to start with and develop during an externship. Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana's staff also noted that having these early interactions can encourage informal interactions where participants feel more comfortable asking employers questions, including learning more about their career journeys and how they balance multiple professional and personal responsibilities.

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*"That's important—when I go out and I speak to the students and start the connection there... they're hearing it directly from me about how important something is. I also became an employee at [the clinic] because of an externship. So, I think my passion and motivation might be a little bit different than maybe some of my colleagues, because that's how my career started. I know what it means to be given an opportunity and how important it is to be supported."*

*– Employer representative who works with Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana's CCMA training*

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### Connecting Students to Employers Early in Programming (cont'd)

An early engagement strategy can ease pre-conceived notions employers may have about young adults. For example, program staff with the Training Fund commented that many of the young adults in their programs have had life experiences similar to the patients for whom they would care after completing training. These life experiences include personally facing or supporting family members who face

challenges with displacement, mental illness, addiction, etc. As employers engage with the WBL program and meet young adults, Training Fund staff have observed a mindset shift. Employers recognize that the young adults' experiences have equipped them with the social-emotional skillsets — such as empathy and resilience — that is of critical value in caregiving work.



*Training Fund students on-site with their apprenticeship employer.*

## Preparing Young Adults for the Short and Long Term

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*“We share with them that [the occupation] isn’t a lucrative career in terms of money or what they may desire for stability. We don’t sugar coat it. But we also bring in a career exposure piece where guest speakers share their journey from CNA to LPN, and we expose them to other related and attainable careers.... We also have discussions with students about what kinds of opportunities will make the most sense at different parts of their life. For example, [this] job might be a quality job for [a student] right now, but let’s also start planning for what kinds of programs and opportunities you should pursue in the next year or two.”*

*– Program manager with the Training Fund*

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A common WBL programming goal is to build young adults’ interest in and exposure to new careers. Practitioners emphasized that it is also important to be transparent with young people about the realities of the jobs they are being prepared for, as well as the requirements for advancement. For example, at the Training Fund, entry-level jobs as a certified nurse assistant (CNA) are not the end goal for young adult participants. Program staff are upfront in communicating that CNA earnings are insufficient to support a small family. Staff share information about associated occupations along the career path and are transparent about the requirements and timeframe for advancement. A program director with the Training Fund described their approach in the following way:

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*“We are intentional that our program doesn’t position students in a way that they feel stuck or limited... in a way that is saying, ‘I am in this training program and this is me.’ But instead, ‘This training is part of my journey, and I’m directing my path.’”*

*– Program director with the Training Fund*

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Having these practical conversations with young adults are not meant to dissuade them from pursuing job opportunities. Instead, it is part of the process of building trusting relationships with young participants as well as a recognition that they are in an exploratory phase of life. Across all interviews, practitioners underscored that it is important that young adults in their programs are not held to different standards than people of similar age from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, to further support participants, the WBL programs we visited are designed to equip young people with credentials that are useful across a range of different jobs. This includes OSHA-10, CPR, first-aid, and fork-lift certifications. Another example is PowerCorpsPHL’s program, which is designed so that participants can apply skills from the green industry tracks to pursue careers in the solar, electrical, or construction trades.

## Philadelphia Generation Work – Developing Apprenticeship Opportunities for Youth Support Specialists

In 2019, workforce practitioners in Philadelphia's Generation Work community designed a new apprenticeship program for youth support specialists. The concept for the program was informed by young adults' experiences. Across multiple workforce training programs, young people expressed career interest in the youth development field. Practitioners further recognized that their organizations would benefit from the young adults' valuable perspectives and experiences. The apprenticeship program would also help their organizations advance internal diversity, equity, and inclusion objectives. Therefore, a group of Generation Work practitioners explored options that would support young workers' access to career development and postsecondary credentialing. The Training Fund's Behavioral Health/Direct Support Professional apprenticeship program met the immediate needs of young adults and practitioner organizations. The apprenticeship program had flexible on-the-job learning and academic competency requirements and Youth Support Specialist apprentices could enroll in an established registered program.

In 2020, the Youth Support Specialist program launched with five apprentices working at three Philadelphia workforce organizations that serve young adults. The pandemic has created uncertainty in the plans for this program's growth, but there is continued interest and energy in expanding further.

## Nurturing Positive Relationships and Providing Comprehensive Set of Supports

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*"I have lost two siblings to gun violence. And when I came to PowerCorpsPHL, I didn't really trust a lot of people. I didn't feel like anyone could really help me or understand my experience. But speaking to [the therapist] has really helped me get through this and see the bigger picture. And to have unconditional understanding and love [at PowerCorpsPHL] with people who understand me and who come from the same places as me, it's just altogether comforting."*

*– Young adult graduate of PowerCorpsPHL*

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Nurturing positive and healthy relationships promotes the social, emotional, and cognitive growth that young adults need to succeed at work and in life. The WBL programs we visited cultivated these positive relationships with multiple staff members, such as coaches, instructors, case managers, licensed clinicians, and therapists. Staff regularly interact with participants and work together to provide team-based supports. A workforce development advisor at PowerCorpsPHL describes this approach as the following:

*"There are three of us — the crew leader, the workforce advisor, and the supportive service advisor — and we call ourselves 'the squad.' We get together each week to discuss our members — their progress and their needs. And if there is something pressing that is happening, then we're ready to dive in."*

The WBL programs also offer a comprehensive range of critical services to young adults to help address barriers to employment. These supportive services are integral to the programming, because without secure basic needs (such as food and housing), it would be incredibly challenging, if not impossible, for young adults to successfully participate in WBL. Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana, for example, is a program that directly provides and works with community partners to address basic and essential needs — e.g., vaccinations, housing, childcare, clothing, and transportation — that participants should have in place for a successful externship experience. PowerCorpsPHL offers similar support services with a focus on barrier removal, including partnering with Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity to help participants with expungement of criminal records.

## Preparing Young People for Racism that May Occur in the Workplace

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*“We’re upfront and tell our young people that you may hear things on a job that may trigger you, and we’re going to help [prepare you] to handle the situation.”*

*–Workforce development advisor with PowerCorpsPHL*

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Throughout this report, we describe how practitioners work with employers to design and cultivate WBL opportunities that are a good fit for young adult participants. This engagement includes cultivating structured opportunities where participants can grow and learn at work. It also includes having conversations with employers about the race and ethnicity of participants and the employer’s role in providing WBL opportunities that are emotionally safe and inclusive.

Practitioners also acknowledge that while they work to find, cultivate, and secure safe work environments for WBL opportunities, there is a need to prepare young adults for what they may encounter in the workplace, within WBL and in subsequent employment. Preparing participants for situations where they may encounter workplace racism, including microaggressions, is part of this preparation. Practitioners noted multiple objectives for this work, including:

- Creating a safe space for young adults to discuss their experiences;
- Equipping young adults with the agency and resilience needed to manage racial stress; and
- Equipping young adults with the tools and techniques necessary to advocate for themselves.

Racial dynamics in the workplace can be addressed during classroom-based instruction. This includes having workshops that engage participants in discussions around code switching, how to navigate a predominantly white office culture, and how to recognize and address instances of discrimination and exploitation (e.g., wage theft). Training Fund staff describe this engagement with young adults as:

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*“We talk [with students] about their story and their experiences. We help them understand that these aren’t the things that hold you back — it is what pushes you forward.”*

*–Training Fund staff*

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A young adult graduate of the Training Fund’s CNA training program described her experience with these supports as:

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*“I like it that they did not just train us on what [skills and responsibilities] we need to do [at work], but they helped us feel confident and prepared for work. How to switch our mindsets and handle situations, how to take negative experiences and throw them away, and how to advocate and be our best [selves].”*

*–Young adult graduate of the Training Fund’s CNA training program*

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PowerCorpsPHL provides contextualized learning to help young adults consider how they can respond to and navigate situations in the workplace, especially workplaces where white supervisors and coworkers are the majority. Through scenarios, participants are coached on ways that they can respond to challenges that may arise. For some of the scenarios, race and culture are an explicit part of the situation. Others are not explicitly about race, but a young person’s racial and ethnic background could play a role in how the situation is perceived and handled by supervisors and colleagues. For instance, there are aspects of predominantly white businesses, such as a narrowly defined view of “professionalism,” that can manifest in conversations that aren’t explicitly about race.

## Preparing Young People for Racism that May Occur in the Workplace (cont'd)

Example scenarios include:

- During a discussion at work, coworkers express views about kneeling during the US national anthem, and you don't agree with their opinions. How do you proceed?
- You try to share your ideas at work and feel like they aren't taken into consideration. How do you proceed?
- You have just received an evaluation and disagree with your supervisor's observations about your performance. You become defensive and advocate for yourself. Your supervisor decides to pause the conversation. How do you proceed?

Having these conversations can be emotionally and mentally taxing, both for practitioners and young adults. Practitioners also emphasized that preparing young adults for a racialized work experience can't be fully addressed in classroom sessions. Therefore, staff use a trauma-informed care<sup>9</sup> approach in their work and make sure ongoing engagement and

supports are available. As an example, a workforce development manager with PowerCorpsPHL describes:

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*"There may be times where something has triggered a young person at work or at home and [he or she] will be blowing up and cursing people out. I'll get a phone call from the crew lead and [he or she] will say '[Member] needs some help today. Can you come out to site and just put your eyes on [him or her] and see what's going on?' I see this as my role to coach the young person as they're working. This coaching is also part of WBL. It's real-time coaching and supports on how to be a professional, how to conduct yourself, and how to responsibly advocate for yourself."*

*—Workforce development manager with  
PowerCorpsPHL*

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PowerCorpsPHL students putting their skills to work outside of the classroom.

<sup>9</sup> Trauma-informed care acknowledges the deep impact of trauma on people in a system and responds by incorporating education about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices while actively resisting re-traumatization. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma Informed Approach." Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, July 2014. <https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4884.pdf>

## The Work of Managing WBL Opportunities with Employers

Practitioners also spend significant time and energy working with employers to identify, cultivate, and manage WBL opportunities. This work involves considerable engagement with employers to structure and support WBL opportunities where young adults are introduced to substantive work experiences in safe and supportive environments. Through these WBL opportunities, young adults are not only developing the technical and socio-emotional skills necessary for a job, but practitioners also work to make sure that young adults are connected to supervisors and colleagues who can support them using positive communication.

In designing and managing WBL opportunities, practitioners balance meeting both young adults and employers' needs. Staff take into account employers' schedules and their capacity to support young adults in the workplace. Concurrently, they consider the varying needs of young participants — including their participants' interests, schedules, and personal caregiving needs — and make appropriate matches to employers. This matching includes assessing fit in terms of culture and diversity in the workplace. Below, we provide further detail on the behind-the-scenes administrative work, as well as the relationship-building work with employers that practitioners engage in to design and manage WBL.

### Discerning Occupations for which WBL is a Feasible Option

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*“Medical assistants are a high-demand position at our clinics and [the program] has been a direct pipeline of qualified applicants for us. We're able to train externs during the student stage, and when they graduate, they're ready to be an employee... As soon as I have a position open, I reach out to a prior extern.”*

*—Clinic manager at a healthcare facility that sponsors externs from Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana's CCMA program*

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An important first step in designing WBL programs is to identify occupations where WBL is feasible and a value-add option for employers. Practitioners work with employers to understand business needs, as well as how participation in WBL would be valuable to the employer. In conducting this work, practitioners shared that it is helpful when they can demonstrate that they understand the sector, the employer's workforce needs, and how having a relationship with a workforce program can be of value. An AJAC business developer described the importance of having industry knowledge, stating:

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*“A lot of times, if employers don't view you as helpful to them, then they aren't going to talk to you.”*

*—Business developer with AJAC*

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In addition to developing background knowledge about a sector, AJAC staff engage

employers in discussions to understand which occupations are critical and core to business operations. Staff also engage manufacturers in conversations about how to recruit, develop, and support employees in these occupations, and explore whether and how supporting WBL opportunities could be a value-add strategy for the business.

Another way to identify potential WBL opportunities is to consider occupations where on-the-job experience is a common requisite. For example, Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana and the Training Fund offer WBL programs in allied health occupations, many of which require clinical experience as part of the certification process. Staff leveraged existing relationships with healthcare providers and explored the feasibility of providing WBL programming for young adult clients. Practitioners further shared that an advantage of this strategy is that the employers were already familiar with how to structure and support WBL opportunities.

## Developing Strategies to Address Employer-Associated Risks and Burdens with Providing WBL

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*“You don’t know how long it takes me to educate a company that they can obtain a minor work permit and hire a young person. I have a full packet of documents that explains how and why they should do it and how we can be a liaison for the apprenticeship registration and compliance process.”*

*– Business developer with AJAC*

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Bringing young people into the workplace may be a risky proposition for employers. Manufacturing employers may have concerns about young people’s safety on the production floor. Or insurance coverage may prohibit the employment of individuals below a certain age or without specific credentials, including a driver’s license. And employers may not want to take on the administrative burden of managing paperwork and reporting requirements for WBL participants.

Practitioners use a range of strategies to encourage employer participation in WBL programming. Training Fund staff accompany young participants to their clinicals, offering coaching support to both participants and supervisors and helping to relieve employer

anxiety about having young people in a patient-care setting. PowerCorpsPHL works with Philadelphia Parks & Recreation and the Philadelphia Water Department to secure contracts that allow them to directly employ young adult participants. Under this arrangement, participants are employees of PowerCorpsPHL, and the organization is responsible for supervision, pay, and workplace health and safety.<sup>10</sup> AJAC and the Training Fund serve as the sponsor of record for apprenticeship programs. As the sponsor of record, practitioner staff help employers complete apprenticeship registration paperwork and relieve employers from the administrative responsibility of tracking and reporting apprenticeship data.



*A student at work during AJAC’s Youth Apprenticeship program.*

<sup>10</sup> EducationWorks is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization that provides backend payroll and administrative support to PowerCorpsPHL.

## Vetting Employment Sites with an Eye towards Good Fit Job Opportunities

*“There is a lot of bad employment out there. A lot of people hire with bad intentions and for the wrong reasons. For example, they’ll think ‘Let me get this young person who doesn’t know any better and I can under-employ them for the next five to 10 years.’... I look for employers who believe in career development and providing individual support.”*

*– Business developer with AJAC*

Practitioners vet WBL employment opportunities to find those that are a good fit for young participants. Good fit jobs are defined differently based on young adults’ priorities, but generally they are found in companies where management practices support young adults’ ability to retain employment, help employees learn and advance at work, and use scheduling practices that support a young adult’s need to balance work, school, and family care responsibilities.

Visiting employment sites is one way to vet whether potential WBL opportunities are good fit jobs. Through site visits, practitioners can:

- Understand the accessibility of the work site — e.g. proximity to public transportation, availability of parking.
- Observe the demographic characteristics (age, sex, and/or race)

of the frontline workers and supervisors at the facility.

- Observe the type of equipment that workers use and gauge whether it is aligned with the students’ training and interests.
- Meet potential WBL supervisors and learn firsthand about their mindset around supporting worker stability and growth.

Visits are also a helpful way for practitioners to start conversations with employers about the types of resources and supports that young adults may need on the job. This includes discussing schedules and exploring if there are options that align with the public transportation schedule or a young person’s class schedule. It also includes sharing more about a young person’s background and the types of mentoring supports that would be helpful.



*Students at work in PowercorpsPHL’s electric and solar training program.*

## Helping Employers Structure and Support WBL Opportunities

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*“We’re having upfront conversations with employers about how to support our young people through WBL. How can we ensure that [through WBL] participants are mastering the skills that are taught in the classroom and that are needed for success in a job? How can employers support the human growth and development that our participants need?”*

*– Program director with the Training Fund*

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Through WBL, participants should have opportunities to apply classroom-based learning in a workplace. Therefore, practitioners engage with employers to ensure that young adults master the necessary competencies and skills, including socio-emotional skills, at work. Three ways that practitioners work with employers to structure and support WBL opportunities include: identifying key job functions that young adults will perform on the job; providing guidance on how to assess and provide feedback to young adults; and supporting the development of healthy relationships with supervisors and colleagues.

Practitioners engage with employers to explore how the competencies gained in the classroom relate to various work tasks. Once this understanding is established, practitioners and employers jointly plan the daily responsibilities and job duties that will be expected of participants. During planning discussions, practitioners also work out the details for how young adults will be supported at work, including clarifying the role of supervisors to onboard, train, and support participants at work. The programs we visited have developed tools and processes to support the supervision process at work sites. For example, the instructor for the nurse aide program at the Training Fund accompanies participants to their clinicals and provides additional onboarding and supervisory support at the worksite. PowerCorpsPHL has developed a tool that details the types of competencies — technical and interpersonal skills — that participants are expected to gain in the program. The tool has a rubric with concrete examples that helps supervisors assess participants’ performance and note whether they are: thriving, capable, stable, vulnerable, or in crisis. Worksite supervisors use the tool to assess participants skill development, and it is also used to guide conversations in which

participants are provided feedback about their performance.

Finally, a good WBL experience for a young adult rests on their working in a safe and supportive environment. Practitioners work with employers to identify supervisors and colleagues who can mentor and guide participants through a range of skill development experiences. This could include identifying a mentor who is close in age to the young adult participant, a mentor who understands a young adult’s life circumstances and why they may not have followed a traditional career path, or a mentor who has had a similar experience with WBL, understands the value of it, and can provide guidance. A program manager at the Training Fund described this relationship as someone who a young participant can ask for support without hesitation:

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*“Apprentices need to trust that person [the mentor] enough to be able to say, ‘I’m lost and I am just making it up as I go along’ or ‘my kid didn’t sleep last night and I don’t want to get written up, but my life is a hot mess right now.’ That’s the kind of relationship and support we’d like for apprentices to have at work.”*

*–Program manager at the Training Fund*

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To promote the cultivation of relationships with these qualities, the Training Fund provides incentives to mentors who support apprentices. In addition to receiving stipends, mentors receive training on how to be a mentor and develop trusting relationships. Employers have commented that in addition to apprenticeship work supporting the growth and development of young adults, mentors benefit from the professional development opportunity as well.

## Paying Young Adults During WBL Employment

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*“Entering into a training program, instead of having a job, can be a big sacrifice for our young people. There are tradeoffs they have to weigh.”*

*– Program director with The Training Fund*

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It is critically important for young adults — especially those who need to pay for necessities such as food, housing, and caregiving responsibilities — to earn income. And while there aren't tuition costs associated with the WBL programs we visited, there are opportunity costs that participants weigh, such as choosing between enrolling in training for several months or obtaining a job and earning a paycheck. Given this, practitioners emphasized that it is critical for young adults to be compensated during WBL. Compensation not only supports immediate income needs. It also reinforces to young adults that they are providing essential services and that their work and time is valuable. Employers can also benefit from compensating young adults for their work. Young adults have a greater sense of investment in their work if they are compensated. Additionally, paying young adults for their work can help address some of the challenges they may face (e.g., paying for transportation, food, etc.) and improve productivity at work.

Practitioners work with employers to identify ways to ensure that participants are fairly compensated for their work. For example, Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana leverages grant funding to pay age-eligible externs' wages in their CCMA training program. AJAC and the Training Fund's students receive a stipend during pre-apprenticeship, and the apprenticeship program positions young adults to enter private-sector employment where they are paid a fair wage by employers. PowerCorpsPHL participants are paid a stipend through the AmeriCorps program and receive an education award<sup>11</sup> that they can use up to seven years after program graduation. Additionally, PowerCorpsPHL secured financial support from both the local workforce investment board and private philanthropy to supplement the stipend and ensure participants are compensated above Philadelphia's minimum wage, starting at \$10/hour. As participants enter more advanced, career-specific training tracks, their wage rate increases.

<sup>11</sup> Once participants complete their term and required hours, they receive an education award from AmeriCorps. It can be utilized to pay off loans from past education, or it can be used towards any accredited institution within seven years of completing the program.

## Concluding Thoughts

In the wake of COVID-19 and our nation's reckoning with racial injustice and inequity, we find ourselves in this moment in our history that shouldn't be wasted. WBL opportunities for young adults of color will be more important now than ever. The ongoing impact of systemic racism on education and employment is strikingly visible in the pandemic economy. Young adults of color remain among those most significantly impacted by the COVID-19 recession — with unemployment rates near 20% for women and up to 25% for men among 16-to-24-year-old Black, Latinx, and mixed-race workers.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, because a high concentration of young adults worked in the retail and hospitality industries before the pandemic, there is great uncertainty whether there will be jobs for them to return to.<sup>13</sup>

We have an opportunity to redesign systems and structures in ways that are race-conscious, address inequities, and benefit everyone. Race-conscious investments in WBL opportunities will help ensure that the most diverse generation of workers in US history are equitably prepared for and connected to good job opportunities.

### Practitioners

The following are considerations for workforce leaders who are interested in designing and implementing WBL programs that build stronger connections to economic opportunity for young workers of color.

#### **Provide case management and support services that address the experiences and needs of young adults of color**

Case management and support services are critical for helping young adults establish stability and make progress toward longer-term education and career goals. Workforce leaders shared that programs can more effectively support participants when all staff (not just counselors and case managers) are engaged in identifying, communicating, and supporting

participants' needs. This approach requires setting expectations and providing time for program staff to communicate and coordinate with one another.

Additionally, it is important to prepare young adults for the realities of employment after graduation, including potentially working in predominantly white workplaces. Designing programming where race and social identity are addressed requires having staff who have the skills and trust to hold what can be challenging conversations. Engaging peers or working with a consultant can help support the capacity for staff comfort, awareness, and skills to explicitly address and support young adults and engage employers around dealing with racial bias and injustice.

#### **Have intentional conversations with employers about what is a 'good fit' job for young adults of color**

In a moment where racial and economic disparities have been put under the spotlight, businesses are increasingly understanding that their previous diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts fall short. Many employers are struggling to figure out what to do next. We've observed that [asking employers questions](#)<sup>14</sup> can help them reflect upon their employment practices and identify ways to build and retain a diverse, inclusive, and engaged workforce. These conversations also offer an opportunity to reframe employment of young adults in terms of the assets they bring to the workplace while also describing the types of supports and structures that are necessary for participants to succeed at work. Such conversations can also open the door to opportunities for workforce providers to work directly with employers and help shape good fit job opportunities. This engagement could include training and coaching supervisors of young workers on how to support employee growth and development, as well as foster inclusion within their teams.

<sup>12</sup> Rodgers III, William M. & Freeman, Richard. "The COVID-19 Recession Is Hitting Young Workers — Especially Young Workers of Color — the Hardest." The Century Foundation. November 10, 2020. <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-covid-19-recession-is-hitting-young-workers-especially-young-workers-of-color-the-hardest/>

<sup>13</sup> Gould, Elise & Kassa, Melat. "Young workers hit hard by the COVID-19 economy." Economic Policy Institute. October 14, 2020. <https://www.epi.org/publication/young-workers-covid-recession/>

<sup>14</sup> Jain, Ranita, Vivian Vázquez, and Amy Blair. "Voices from the Field: Engaging Employers to Connect Young Adults to Good Fit Employment." The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program. October 2020. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/voices-from-the-field-engaging-employers-to-connect-young-adults-to-good-fit-employment/>

## Public and Philanthropic Investors

We are impressed with how much WBL programs can accomplish given the level of funding they have secured. Simply put, these programs are under-invested in given their social and economic contributions. The following are considerations for public and private investors who seek to support the continuity of quality WBL opportunities for young adults of color.

### ***Support investments that integrate comprehensive support services and compensate participants as part of WBL programming***

WBL practitioners have shared that it is difficult to secure public funding that adequately supports the level of staff resources needed for effective programming. Given this challenge, program leaders find themselves using philanthropic and private funding to augment public workforce dollars. This braiding of funds adds complexity to WBL programming and takes away from practitioners' capacity to support both young adults and employers. Practitioners find themselves taking on the administrative burden of managing data collection and reporting requirements for various funding streams, as well as the added complexity of managing the different requirements for allowable services, eligible participants, and length of service provision.

Investments in WBL should support the comprehensive and continuous suite of services that young adults need. Most importantly, funding for support services should not be considered ancillary, but as an essential aspect of investing in a young person's success. Workforce program leaders maintain that providing these supports contributes to important participant milestones, such as program completion, obtaining and retaining employment, enrolling in post-secondary education, and decreased justice system involvement.

Additionally, it is critically important for young adults — especially those who need to pay for necessities such as food, housing, and caregiving responsibilities — to earn income. For many young adults, especially young adults of color who have been hardest hit by COVID-19,

participating in a WBL program could mean sacrificing wages they would earn if they were employed. Investments in WBL should compensate participants for their time and work while in the program. In doing so, young adults have greater incentives to participate in WBL opportunities that will help them break out of the cycle of low-wage jobs and attain the experience, education, and relationships necessary for stable and well-paying employment.

### ***Introduce performance metrics that capture practitioners' work with employers to change workplace practices***

Performance measures for WBL programs fail to document the extent of practitioners' work with employers to identify and cultivate good fit jobs. Good fit jobs are jobs in which young adults are connected to caring adults, are provided learning opportunities through work, and guided with supportive supervision. However, the typical measures to assess WBL program performance focus on training completion, certifications earned, job placement, wage rates, and short-term employment retention. While these indicators point to important participant milestones, they do not capture the breadth of practitioners' ongoing work with employers.

Through our research, we have learned of instances where employers, through reflection with a workforce provider, have made practice changes that are beneficial to their business and to all of their workers — young adults and older. This includes employers providing more stable scheduling, changing work assignments to locations that are closer to an employee's home or school, and engaging workforce organizations to train supervisors of young workers. This work is critical to the success of a young adult in employment, and unfortunately it is not measured. Investors should introduce new performance measures that acknowledge and bolster the important work that practitioners are engaged in. This includes capturing employer changes in areas such as hiring practices, scheduling practices, commitment to supervisor training, formalization of onboarding processes, and adoption of assessment and feedback practices.

## Acknowledgements

**W**e would like to thank many people who made this publication possible. We deeply appreciate the workforce development professionals in Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Seattle whose work informed this publication. This project would not have been possible without their thoughts and reflections, and we thank them for taking the time to share their valuable insights and allowing us to visit their programs in person. We would like to especially thank: in Indianapolis, Michelle White, Jesamyn Sparks, and Jessamon Jones at Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana; in Philadelphia, Sarah Robbins and Peter Chomko at District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund and Julia Hillengas from PowerCorps PHL; and in Seattle, Chris Pierson and Shannon Matson from AJAC. We also extend our deepest gratitude and appreciation to the current staff, students, and program graduates we spoke to — we are inspired by you. Thank you to Amy Blair and Maureen Conway, who provided invaluable insights during the planning and writing of this publication. We also thank Tony Mastria for his work preparing and designing this report for publication. Finally, we thank the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their generous support of this work. We are especially grateful to Allison Gerber and Laura Burgher for support and thoughtful feedback during the project and on this report.



*Students in the Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA) WBL program receiving classroom instruction at Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana.*



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