

## *What Works in Training Low-Income Youth for Good Jobs: A Conversation with the Director of Year Up New York*

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In the last decade there has been a substantial decline in youth employment rates. The current employment rate of American teenagers, 16 to 19 years old, is now only one-half what it was in 2000. And the rates are particularly low for black youth from low-income families; around 10 percent by some measures.<sup>1</sup> Given that a large share of disadvantaged youth has a weak attachment to the educational system, many are neither enrolled in school nor have paid employment.

Nationwide one out of seven young people ages 16 to 24 years old are disconnected from school, while in New York City, the disconnected rate is 15.2 percent. However, it is much higher in the black neighborhoods of Central Harlem (23.7 percent) and Ocean Hill, Brownsville (29.6 percent); and the Latino South Bronx (35.6 percent). Overall, the black and Latino NYC rates are more than double the white and Asian-American rates.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, there has

numerous communities; everything from neighborhood-based community development to working in youth development to working on prison reform.

What became really clear at some point in my career, maybe about seven years ago, was that my vocation was to work in service of young people. And that caused a shift that landed me directly leading the work of young adults. So immediately before arriving at Year Up, I was the National Executive Director for another youth-serving organization. The opportunity to scale the work of Year Up surfaced, and it was irresistible because we have an economic and a moral imperative to serve young people. The core technology and programming that we offer yields tangible and immediate results, and really helps to move young people from poverty to careers within the span of a year. In March of last year, I accepted the opportunity to become the Executive Director of Year Up New York.

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2020

hit light speed. Young adults today face significant attitudinal and behavioral challenges, and some that are unprecedented. Being liabilities rather than assets in this age, I think, is a huge obstacle that young adults face.

So in the aggregate, I think that young adults today face significant challenges, some that are unprecedented. I think the greatest of these is perception, the perception of young adults as having attitudinal and behavioral challenges -- being complacent, lazy, liabilities rather than assets. That, I think, is a huge obstacle that young adults face.

As a result, I think that the challenges are certainly exacerbated in education, in being economically and financially stable. I think about some of the social services that have benefitted our young adults for so long and the continued need for these social services to be present. We need to place a tremendous amount of emphasis

And then we have a rigorous admissions process, through which the young adults need to demonstrate their interest in our program. They complete an interest form. It is mandatory that they attend an open house, because it demonstrates their wherewithal to stay connected to the program.

Those for whom the program is the right fit, because the ways in which we train are of interest to them, they come in for a learning assessment. What we assess is baseline reading comprehension, math skills. They then come in for an interview. And that's where we really begin to understand, "What does this opportunity mean to you?" And undoubtedly, our most successful cases are those young adults that have the grit, the motivation, the hunger to transform. Many have had starts and stops, whether it's been in the workforce or with education, but are really ready to take this opportunity on to the next level.

**Q: What share of these applicants is excluded because of the testing component, the skill levels that they have? How many make it through that funnel to these interviews?**

**AG:** I would say that maybe about a quarter of the young adults are ones that may not be testing the highest, the numbers lower than what one might think. The greatest sort of screen for acceptance is, "Are we the right program for you based on your interest, professional interest, and your motivation?" And that's something that's very clear. If you're a student who's interested in nursing, thank you for your interest in Year Up, but I'm going to refer you to a colleague who can better serve you, right?

**Q: So you're taking in students that have modest skills, but that's not a significant barrier?**

**AG:** No. Our work is really grounded in this notion of high support, high expectations. And so the high support that comes along with enrollment in Year Up. We have a dedicated team of clinically trained social workers that are there to help our young adults navigate what we call the outside noise, those social challenges.

Young adults come with many risks: whether it's need for child care, managing their housing, managing their entitlements. In some cases, they're the primary caretaker in their homes. We've had young adults who have been in transition from aging out of foster care. Some of our young adults have had substance abuse issues. Some have been involved in the criminal justice system. So the risks are intense, and our commitment is to provide this dedicated team of social workers to support them. More than that, we also recruit volunteers that serve as tutors to support their learning, both in technical learning as well as their learning in writing and their learning in math. Everyone on staff is an advisor.

**Q: About ten percent of your population is parents?**

**AG:** It's actually a little higher now. It's more like about 20 percent of our population.

**Q: So what happens with child care responsibility in the daytime?**

**AG:** We help them find child care in their communities, or sometimes closer to Year Up, which may be more convenient. Those are the types of services that we provide. It's just helping them navigate what resources are available to them, which they may not have access to.

**Q: You have modest numbers who have housing issues, who are single parent applicants, and those that have had some college, and those who haven't. Do you find that any of these factors are predictors in terms of who succeeds in the program?**

**AG:** That's a great question. No. We have not found a direct correlation between their risk and their propensity for success. What really leads to their propensity of success is how willing they are and how ready they are to

commit to the expectations of the program. I can think of hundreds of young adults who have had these challenges. We just had a recent graduate who interned at Marsh & McLennan, which has been one of our

nationally very deeply, because, as we think about growth and scale, there are certainly limitations to what we can do in our intensive core model.

We have been exploring other delivery channels, two in particular. One is what we call the Professional Training Corps, or the PTC, where we work in partnership with community colleges. And the results of working in partnership with community colleges gives us access to greater numbers of students, it helps to capitalize on the infrastructure of the colleges that we work with, and really also begins to shift the ways in which community colleges are approaching education.

So when we go in, it's modeled after the ROTC model. And you see young adults on campus dressed in suits and ties, professionally. Now they're part of this cohort. And it supports their pe

**AG:** It's a really interesting question. I'm very excited about the new administ

the apprenticeship, the internship, which is six months long. It's not a week. It's not two weeks. It's lengthy enough that they've dedicated half of a year.

**Q: And it's a serious program, because these companies are paying?**

**AG:** Oh, absolutely, so that is not the charitable piece of our work at all. I mean, there is a business proposition here, and when we seek corporate partners, and even our existing corporate partners, we begin with, "How can we train young adults to meet your business need?"

And for the companies, it's a terrific opportunity. It's a try-to-buy model, because if you have acculturated a young adult or a professional for six months, they've yielded results for your bottom line, why wouldn't you hire them? It's just a smart business decision.

**Q: You have four tracks?**

**AG:** IT, finance operations, quality assurance—mainly by way of software tes



When I get feedback from our corporate partners, what they'll say is, "We'll train them. But undoubtedly, one of the added values that you bring is that you teach them these soft skills that we're able to see. We're able to really distinguish Year Up interns on our site." And you see it when you're walking down the hallway, and they're greeting you, and they're welcoming you, and they're shaking your hand. So that, I would say, one of our strengths is the soft skills training that we offer.

**Q: Do you get much pushback from young adults in this area? Is their receptiveness an important factor that distinguishes those people who are able to get through the program and those people who are less successful?**

**AG:** I think so. Yeah, I think that's a fair assessment. It's definitely those young adults that are most receptive to the feedback around how to shift their attitudes, behaviors and communications, the ABCs, are likely to succeed the most. And it begins as early as the admissions process. A young adult comes in, and they don't come in with a jacket and tie, we say, "Well, you know, here are the expectations." The next time they come in, if they don't have a jacket and tie, it gives us an indication as to whether or not they were able to apply that feedback.

Another interesting phenomenon that happens is, in the learning communities—and even in the classrooms—they hold each other accountable. So it is not uncommon that a young adult arrives—and you know this, but we have a contract, and that contract our young adults sign when they enroll, and there are certain expectations around behavior, around attitudes, around arrival on time, their deliverables.

And when there are infractions on those expectations, those infractions are weighted in points. Those points are deducted from the contract. Everyone starts out with 200 points, but in essence you can fire yourself if you zero out. Those points are also deducted from their stipends, and these are stipends that they're earning. So the incentive to perform is very high.

That said, it's not uncommon to have a young adult show up late twice, and for their colleague to say, "What's going on? You're slowing us down, and you're slowing yourself down. And the reality is, this opportunity could have been someone else's. So what are you going to do about it?" Right now, we're just welcoming a new class. They're getting to know each other. Week four, five, you see that accountability ratcheting up.

**Q: How much of the dropout occurs in the first two months?**

**AG:** Oh, I'd say that's probably where we see the steepest decline, is early on. And often it's because the adjustment period is so steep or challenging. But that's typically where we see the steepest decline. In the last class that just entered in January at the completion of six months, we were able to retain 89% of the class.

**Q: That's higher than your general figures have been.**

**AG:** It is. This was unprecedented. We were very thoughtful about the retention strat

About 25 to 30 percent of the internships will convert into jobs, permanent jobs. We have some work to do in New York in particular to increase that number, although that is our national standard. There is a team on my staff that we call the career and alumni services team, and their primary job, in addition to working with alumni, is to be a placement agency. And we've thought differently about how to staff that team. In fact, it's primarily staffed by people who come from placement, recruiting, staffing, and so they've developed quite strong relationships with corporations and are really clear about how to advocate for our young adults, and in fact are taking the lead in representing our young adults as their staff. I think in many ways, that's what's caused the shift.

**Q: How many years after they graduate would you be able to follow on and help your alums with th**

Interestingly, it's very surprising to see a young adult in the communities that we recruit from standing at the bus stop wearing a suit and tie, right? They're either going to a funeral, a wedding or a graduation. And their peers begin to notice and see the transformation and want some of that, too. So we're actually finding that while there are some shifts in relationships that need to happen, their participation in the program can also have a tremendous transformative impact on those young adults in those communities, and adults in general.

In answer to your question, we had our first marriage of Year Up classmates. They graduated in January, and I think they got married like two or three months later. It's not uncommon to see one person go through the program and their significant other—be it their spouse or their partner—go through the program the next time.

So I have a young man who graduated from the program first. His wife then went through the program, and she's now one of our highest-earning alumni. I can think of another couple: he went through the program first and she went later. She was actually one of our first university graduates. She's an NYU alum.

But more than that, we now are seeing homeowners. We're seeing young people who carry their children through the threshold of their homes and put them in their beds, and that child will never know what it's like not to sleep in their own bed, not to have a nutritious meal that's cooked in their kitchen, in the home that their parent bought. And those are the results that we're seeing now.

**Q: These are very powerful, and I'm sure make your job very rewarding.**

**AG:** It's what gives me a sense of meaning.

**Q: You've already had a major study of your outcomes by the Economic Mobility Foundation, and the Labor Department last month came out with a study of job training, where they cited that study. Is there anything in the works to do research on your alumni further out, to look at your alums three, four, five years out and try to see any patterns there with their job mobility?**

**AG:** Yes. We are currently participating in a Administration for Children and Families study. We're the only

We were finding that a critical mass were homeowners, were seeing some sense of upward mobility. What we also found was that not many were going back and completing college or entering into college.

That said, I want to go back to an earlier question that you asked about the distinguishing features between us and some of our colleagues. Year Up New York also has a college partnership. We partner with Empire State College out of the SUNY system. And at the completion of the first six months of training, our young adults can earn anywhere between 18 to 21 credits, because our training and curriculum has been approved and certified by the state board.

At the completion of an internship, they can earn up to 30 credits, depending on the rigor of their internship and what they accomplished there. So at the completion of the program, our young adults are more than halfway through an associate's degree in some cases. So that's another distinguishing feature.

**Q: By the way, La Guardia Community College had a training program for welfare leavers, and they had something for their tenth anniversary. Not surprisingly, not many of their successful students were going on to school because they felt they were in a successful position in their jobs and personal lives.**

**AG:** Absolutely. I think about my background, which was very traditional. You go to a four-year college -- that seemed to be the only way. I think what's really exciting is alternative routes towards financial sustainability and success, Year Up being one of them.

**Q: Jobs First New York and Demos have a new study out about the youth jobs crisis. We're five years past the official end of the Great Recession. Unemployment is still relatively high in New York. And this new study found that, among 18- to 24-year-olds who had a high school degree but no college, the unemployment rate is over 11% and underemployment is 20%.**

**AG:** That's right.

**AG:** They do. I mean, this is by way of soft skills, but also by way of their rights. We do a lot of work around sexual harassment, around working across genders. We have a guest speaker series that we bring in. We have a week that we hold twice a year that we call Diversity Week, where we talk very specifically about what it means to be a woman in the workplace, what it means to have a woman as your direct supervisor, if you're a young man. And being sure that they have access to that framework.

We only do a little bit around fair labor standards. But it's more about helping our young adults to be more knowledgeable citizens than anything else.

**Q: An issue that's been coming up more and more in the business press as well as the labor press lately is pay transparency. Do you say anything to them about what some call the last taboo, "Don't talk to your coworkers about your pay." Do you raise that issue with these young people?**

**AG**

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Cherry, "Year-Round Part-Time Employment: A Pathway to the Middle Class," Yahoo Finance (2/25/2014) <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/year-round-part-time-teen-employment--a-pathway-to-the-middle-class-190107084.html>

<sup>2</sup> "One in Seven," *of A* (Sept 2012) <http://measureofamerica.org/one-in-seven>

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lerman, "Can Expanding Apprenticeships Help Families?" (11/19/2013). <http://family-studies.org/can-expanding-apprenticeship-strengthen-american-families/>

<sup>4</sup> Anne Roder and Mark Elliott, "Sustained Gains: Year Up's Continued Impact on Young Adults' Earnings," Economic Mobility Corporation (3/2014). <http://economicmobilitycorp.org/uploads/sustained-gains-economic-mobility-corp.pdf>