

YouthBuild Tips

Promising Practices for Establishing and Maintaining Relationships with Union-Sponsored Registered Apprenticeships

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Editor's Note

Registered apprenticeship training can be sponsored by local employers, trade associations, or labor-management organizations associated with unions. This article will focus on the ways YouthBuild programs develop meaningful partnerships with labor-management or union-sponsored registered apprenticeship programs. We will consider the successes of YouthBuild programs that have moved past the stage of initial engagement to form partnerships with unions that have led to placing YouthBuild graduates into registered apprenticeships.

Though the construction industry is slow in many areas because of the weak economy, the industry is slated to grow over the next 10 years.¹ As workers retire and new infrastructure is built, construction jobs will become available. In many cases, union membership offers higher wages and better benefits for those employed in the construction industry than nonunion workers.² By building partnerships with unions, YouthBuild programs can help young people access promising career paths.

Many who are interested in construction careers, particularly commercial construction, enter the field through apprenticeship programs. According to the Aspen Institute,

Apprenticeships are typically sponsored by local employers, trade associations, and/or unions that assist apprentices with placement on a job. Apprenticeship provides entering apprentices with a clear career pathway and process by which they can advance. Apprenticeship involves a combination of structured classroom and applied learning on the job, which

¹ "High Growth Industry Profile," United States Department of Labor, 2010.

http://www.doleta.gov/BRG/Indprof/construction_profile.cfm

² Conway, Maureen and Allison Gerber. "Construction Pre-Apprenticeship Programs: Results from a National Survey." *The Aspen Institute*, July 2009. Pg.5.

<http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/construction-pre-apprenticeship-programs-results-national-survey>.

ensures that apprentices are obtaining marketable, industry-recognized skills as they progress. However, apprenticeship slots are limited in number, and entry is competitive.³

The goal of many YouthBuild programs that pursue relationships with unions is to help their graduates gain entry into registered apprenticeship. Some YouthBuild programs operate as pre-apprenticeship programs, while others operate in partnership with established pre-apprenticeship programs. YouthBuild programs and their union partners have agreements in which the registered apprenticeship agrees to accept or give preference to students who complete pre-apprenticeship training. In other partnerships, YouthBuild graduates enter apprenticeship training with elevated standing, allowing them to skip over introductory training courses because of their YouthBuild experience. YouthBuild programs without partnership agreements receive input from union members on how best to prepare students academically. Union members introduce students to registered apprenticeship and provide some assistance in the application process. Though union members provide assistance, the registered apprenticeship is not obligated to accept YouthBuild graduates. The nature of partnerships between YouthBuild programs and union registered apprenticeships varies according to the depth and duration of their relationship and factors such as the local economic climate.

This article is based on information gathered from interviews with YouthBuild programs identified by YouthBuild USA staff and coaches as having successful placement outcomes with union registered apprenticeship programs. We interviewed program staff from YouthBuild Providence, YouthBuild San Joaquin, Tomorrow's Builders YouthBuild Charter School, St. Louis YouthBuild, Garfield Jubilee Association, and Portland YouthBuilders. These programs' partnerships range from formal direct entry agreements, to less formal working agreements aimed at preparing students for placement in apprenticeships. This article is not intended to be a survey of the experiences of all YouthBuild programs working with unions. However, the trends and challenges that these programs identify reflect the experiences of others doing this work throughout the YouthBuild field. Because of this, the highlighted examples below provide key pieces of advice for others.

Each staff member interviewed indicated that there was no fast or easy way to build relationships with unions. Partnerships must be built over time, and the process involves a great deal of patience, communication, and research. Each program also emphasized that the weak economy was a significant obstacle to developing partnerships that lead to placement opportunities for students. However, they noted that YouthBuild programs should persevere in seeking to develop and maintain ties to unions so that they are prepared to provide opportunities for their students when the economy recovers.

³ Conway, Maureen and Allison Gerber.

Following is a list of tips based on strategies common among the interviewed programs. A discussion of each tip follows the list.

Tips for Developing Successful Union Partnerships

- Involve union members and apprenticeship coordinators in program planning and development early and often.
- Demonstrate a commitment to working with unions.
- Build relationships with innovative union leaders.
- Understand the needs of the union.
- Research your local economy's challenges and opportunities.
- Provide students with proper training and follow-up.

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If you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact me at dwright@youthbuild.org.

Overview of Highlighted Programs

YouthBuild San Joaquin, (Stockton, California), sponsored by San Joaquin County Office of Education

Director: Sheilah Goulart

Coach: Sandi Waterhouse

Partnership: YouthBuild San Joaquin is a registered pre-apprenticeship program offered through the Northern California Construction Training Center. YouthBuild San Joaquin teaches the normally nine-week Carpenters Union Boot Camp curriculum over its 175-day academic year. This curriculum tracks to the Regional Occupational Program (ROP) Construction Technician curriculum. Students receive an industry-recognized credential from ROP as a result. Completion of YouthBuild, the ROP credential, and the

apprenticeship coordinator's recommendation allows graduates direct entry into the Laborers Union apprenticeship program. "The big advantage of direct entry is it allows graduates to bypass the list of other candidates who have to wait their turn to be offered a spot in our program. Non-direct entry candidates must try out for the apprenticeship by going through a battery of tests and then wait for their name to rise to the top of the list," explained Jeff Armstrong, Director of Apprenticeship for the Nor Cal Laborers Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee.

Successful placements: The program currently has 12 participants who have been indentured with the Laborers Union and eight participants who have been indentured with the Carpenters Union.

YouthBuild Providence, (Providence, Rhode Island), sponsored by The Providence Plan

Director: Anthony Hubbard

Partnership: This program has a successful ongoing relationship with the Building Futures pre-apprenticeship program through a partnership with members of the Rhode Island Building and Construction Trades Council. After a 10-month YouthBuild Providence training program, interested and qualified students may be referred to Building Futures to receive apprenticeship training and subsequent direct entry into union positions.

Successful placements: In 2011, YouthBuild Providence has placed a total of eight students into the Building Futures pre-apprenticeship.

Tomorrow's Builders YouthBuild Charter School, (East St. Louis, Illinois), sponsored by Emerson Park Development Corporation

Director: Vickie Kimmel-Forby

Partner: Alex Gromada, Coordinator of the Southern Illinois Carpenters' Joint Apprenticeship Program.

Partnership: This program has a successful ongoing relationship with the carpenters' local of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America.

Successful placements: In their last cycle, the program placed four students in the Carpenters Union Apprenticeship Program.

St Louis YouthBuild, (St. Louis, Missouri), sponsored by Carpenters Joint Training Fund of St. Louis

Director: Julia Tibbs

Partnership: After several years of a successful partnership that took several forms, the local carpenters union is now the sponsoring organization of St. Louis YouthBuild. Students will receive training on the site of the union apprenticeship program. YouthBuild staff and union apprenticeship staff work together closely.

Successful placements: This program had previously been very successful in placing students in apprenticeships. However, the local construction industry

took a dive during the recession. They expect that their new partnership will help them successfully place students as the economy recovers.

Garfield Jubilee Association, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

Director: Joann Monroe

Partnership: Developed a network consisting of four registered apprenticeship training programs in the area and three unions, and has signed MOUs with each.

Successful placements: This program has placed a total of 12 students into apprenticeship programs since the beginning of their 2009 YouthBuild DOL grant.

Portland YouthBuilders, (Portland, Oregon)

Director: Jill Walters

Construction Manager: Bill Kowalczyk

Partnership: Portland YouthBuilders has partnerships with the Laborers, Carpenters, Roofers, Electricians, and Sheet Metal Workers—most of the crafts in their area. They have direct entry agreements with the Laborers and Carpenters.

Successful placements: In their last cycle, Portland YouthBuilders placed 13 students into apprenticeship programs.

Tips

1. Involve union members and apprenticeship coordinators in program planning and development early and often

Each of the YouthBuild programs interviewed had involved union members, leaders, and apprenticeship coordinators in the development of their program—by asking for input on curricula, inviting them to participate in program events, and engaging them in advisory councils. Through this involvement with union members, the programs gained better understandings of what the unions were looking for and were able to familiarize union members with YouthBuild.

From the Field

Garfield Jubilee: The YouthBuild program of the Garfield Jubilee Association recognized the need to engage union members early and often. They were proactive in approaching all unions in the area and making them aware that YouthBuild was a resource for finding future apprentices. They asked union leaders to visit the YouthBuild program to introduce students to the idea of registered apprenticeship training. Through this early engagement, the program was able to develop a network of union partners throughout the city of Pittsburgh. These partners provide information to the program about

apprenticeship training and help interested students through the application process.

YouthBuild San Joaquin: YouthBuild San Joaquin involved union members in program development from the day they opened their doors. They asked union carpenters to be on an advisory board and to help develop curricula for YouthBuild students. Union carpenters were also asked to participate in program activities such as the Carpentry Challenge. The Carpenters' and Laborers' union contacts involved in the development of the program became comfortable with YouthBuild and reached out to other union leaders. After a few years of positive engagement with YouthBuild, a representative from the Carpenters provided YouthBuild with the Carpenters Boot Camp curriculum and helped them to set up the program. YouthBuild participants complete the boot camp training while still in YouthBuild, and interested students who qualify for the apprenticeship program are then able to bypass the boot camp stage and enter with elevated standing in the Carpenters' registered apprenticeship program, after successfully interviewing with representatives from the Laborers' Union. According to Jeff Armstrong, Director of Apprenticeship for the Nor Cal Laborers Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee, "Those who pass the interview are offered direct entry into our program as long as there is a need for more apprentices in the area. So far, we haven't turned anyone away. We are very proud of our relationship with YouthBuild San Joaquin and we have been getting some stellar apprentices out of it."

YouthBuild Providence: For YouthBuild Providence students who want to pursue a career in construction, pre-apprenticeship training with Building Futures is often the next step. Both YouthBuild Providence and Building Futures are recognized by the Rhode Island Building Trades Council and share a training facility. Building Futures was founded by former YouthBuild Providence Director, Andrew Cortes. This unique and close relationship between the two programs allows YouthBuild Providence to receive information on the kind of apprentices unions are looking for, and which unions are bringing in new apprentices.

Union members help to shape YouthBuild Providence's curriculum. Director Anthony Hubbard explained that since technology is rapidly evolving, YouthBuild Providence updates its training modules each summer to meet the current needs of the building trades. Qualified YouthBuild Providence graduates can apply to Building Futures, ultimately leading to preferred entry into 13 of the 15 unions who belong to the local Building and Construction Trades Council. Apprenticeship and career development coordinators work closely with Building Futures to ensure that YouthBuild students are prepared to transition from one program to the next.

2. Demonstrate commitment to working with unions

The highlighted programs also found it advantageous to express a commitment to working solely with the union, both in terms of finding opportunities for graduates and hiring construction staff.

From the Field

Tomorrow's Builders YouthBuild Charter School: Tomorrow's Builders made a commitment to work only with unions. They hired two retired union carpenters to be their construction trainers and paid their union dues and health insurance so that they could maintain ties to the union. According to Director Vickie Kimmel-Forby, this arrangement has gone a long way toward building trust and communication between the YouthBuild program and the union.

St. Louis YouthBuild: According to Director Julia Tibbs,

St. Louis is a 'union-heavy' city and we knew to get our young people good jobs in construction, we needed to have connections to unions. We hired union members as trainers and construction managers. Over the years we have made a concerted effort to engage with only union-affiliated contractors and representatives to develop internship programs for young people, and to prepare those who are interested in apprenticeships for the program.

Over the years, because of this consistent loyalty to their union relationships, when the economy was strong, St. Louis YouthBuild was able to find their young people good union jobs relatively easily. However, because of the recession, placement has become more difficult. Nevertheless, the program maintained their relationship with the union, and because of this the union seized the opportunity to become the YouthBuild program's parent organization. Together they applied for and won a 2011 YouthBuild Department of Labor grant. Julia expects that this partnership will position her students to get union jobs and enter into the apprenticeship program as the economy recovers.

YouthBuild Providence: While YouthBuild Providence does not exclusively work with unions, they communicate to students the advantages of union-sponsored registered apprenticeship programs. "Non-union work tends to be temporary employment," Director Anthony Hubbard says. "Unions make sure apprentices get off the bench as soon as possible." As a result, YouthBuild Providence recommends to their students that they enter union-sponsored registered apprenticeships if they are interested in careers in the industry. Building Futures will provide them with pre-apprenticeship training and preferred entry into registered apprenticeship. Additionally, Apprentice

Utilization Requirements (AUR) of Rhode Island gives those who pursue apprenticeship training such as Building Futures an advantage. These agreements require a certain percentage of contractors' employees to be apprentices. This allows apprentices to gain the on-the-job experience they need to become journey-level workers.

3. Seek to build relationships with innovative union leaders

According to YouthBuild USA Program Coach Sandi Waterhouse, what makes partnerships with unions really work is if the YouthBuild program can find innovative unions leaders to work with, especially those in charge of registered apprenticeship training. Innovative people will be open not only to working with the YouthBuild population but also to changing systems and potentially the structure of the program to help provide union access to YouthBuild students. The key to finding these individuals is consistent networking with union members, asking to be introduced to leaders and key stakeholders, and regularly inviting them to YouthBuild events. Perseverance is key.

From the Field

Portland YouthBuilders: Besides the slow economy, Construction Manager Bill Kowalczyk says the biggest challenge for establishing effective relationships with unions is the fact that partnerships are built slowly over a long period of time. YouthBuild programs must create real, positive working relationship with unions, and identify those who understand the YouthBuild mission and are willing to work with YouthBuild. Bill offers some suggestions for networking based on the strategies he has used at Portland YouthBuilders to find the right union staff members to work with:

- Go to apprenticeship coordinator meetings.
- Visit the apprenticeship site one-on-one to learn about the atmosphere and requirements.
- Invite representatives from the union to review program curriculum.
- Meet with apprenticeship recruitment staff to find out what they are looking for in successful apprentices.

4. Be aware of the needs of the union

A key to successful partnership building is understanding the union's partners, and determining how your YouthBuild program can help union partners meet their needs. Each of the interviewed programs reported that their partnerships were facilitated by the fact that YouthBuild "had something to offer" the union. They also reported that sensitivity to the challenges faced by the union made negotiating with them easier, because YouthBuild staff

knew the limits of what they could ask for, and what requests would be too unreasonable.

From the Field

Portland YouthBuilders: As did other YouthBuild program representatives, Bill Kowalczyk explained that many union worksites and apprenticeship programs are looking to fill diversity requirements, particularly those that work on state- and federally-funded projects. YouthBuild offers these organizations access to well-qualified workers from underrepresented populations such as people of color and women. However, Kowalczyk explains, it is important to be aware that some union members might be wary of working with young apprentices from low-income communities.

At first Portland YouthBuilders did not pursue becoming a pre-apprenticeship program or developing direct entry agreements. Kowalczyk explains, “In the past, some pre-apprenticeship programs were used to meet racial quotas, and participants were not necessarily put to work or trained properly. The legacy of racism in unions and the notion of pre-apprenticeship programs as entitlement programs left a bad taste in the mouths of many in the unions. It is really detrimental to have the attitude that everyone who applies should be accepted into the apprenticeship program—it really has to be about accepting qualified applicants.”

According to Bill, Portland YouthBuilders focused on developing ties with the unions and sending only qualified individuals to apply for entry into registered apprenticeship programs. This approach led to the development of trust over time, and resulted in the Laborers and Carpenters later approaching Portland YouthBuilders about becoming a pre-apprenticeship program and establishing direct entry agreements.

Tomorrow’s Builders YouthBuild Charter School: Alex Gromada, coordinator of the Southern Illinois Carpenters’ Joint Apprenticeship program—a partner to Tomorrow’ Builders—explained that sometimes, because of local economic realities, it is not a good idea for YouthBuild programs to push for direct entry agreements, or agreements that commit the union to accept students from YouthBuild. In Southern Illinois, he explained, such an agreement is just not economically feasible. In order for a student to be accepted into the apprenticeship program, he or she needs to find a contractor that is committed to hiring them. That employer sends a letter of intent to hire the young person. Once the student has a letter, the student can enter the apprenticeship program. The union apprenticeship program removed other requirements for entry including testing, and interviews with apprenticeship staff. This has made it easier for students to enter. The union also helps YouthBuild students make contacts with employers. However, as Gromada explained, “Finding employers is difficult because of the economy. We are opposed to having a direct entry agreement

that would commit us to accepting applicants, because we want to make sure that the apprentices we accept are able to find jobs when they complete the program. We want a guarantee to hire from an employer first. We don't want to accept more apprentices than we can find jobs for."

5. Research your local economy's challenges and opportunities

According to a report published by the Aspen Institute:

When there is limited demand for workers, there is usually a limited number of apprenticeship slots. It is important to note that, since entry into an apprenticeship is affected by employment projections, the ability to project accurate labor market demand definitely can affect the availability of apprenticeship opportunities. Overall, competition for limited apprenticeship slots is extremely intense.⁴

Knowing what opportunities exist in your area will help your YouthBuild program have more productive conversations with union representatives. By doing this research, YouthBuild programs can become more creative in the types of projects and opportunities for which they prepare students. Research planned construction and infrastructure projects in your area by talking to union leaders, city officials, employers, and workforce development boards. The process of conducting research can be another great way to network. You can also visit websites like the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](http://www.bls.gov) and state labor websites to find out what construction sectors are slated to grow nationally and locally over the next several years.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports,

Employment is expected to grow in the nonresidential construction sector over the decade as ... Replacement of many industrial plants has been delayed for years, and a large number of structures will have to be replaced or remodeled. There will also be a need for all types of medical treatment facilities to meet the demands of the growing elderly population.⁵

It is imperative for YouthBuild programs to keep pace with the changing labor market and take advantage of new opportunities.

⁴ Conway, Maureen and Allison Gerber. "Construction Pre-Apprenticeship Programs: Results from a National Survey." *The Aspen Institute*, July 2009. Pg. 8. <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/construction-pre-apprenticeship-programs-results-national-survey>.

⁵ "Construction Industry Outlook (2008-2018)," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/oco/cg/cgs003.htm#outlook>

From the Field

YouthBuild San Joaquin: YouthBuild USA program coach Sandi Waterhouse explained that the availability of construction work drove the success of YouthBuild San Joaquin's partnership with the Laborers union. However, she explained that San Joaquin's success wasn't just about letting unions approach them when they had a big construction project. Their continued success relies on attention to the local market. Sandi says, "YouthBuild programs need to think beyond housing construction. Big federal projects for infrastructure building (like road construction) also need union laborers. Being aware of both private and public projects of all kinds is essential." Approaching the union with some knowledge of projects they may have in the pipeline can be an important way to open the door. In particular, take YouthBuild out of the context of residential construction only and reframe it to include new kinds of projects. For example, YouthBuild San Joaquin graduates who are now laborers' apprentices are working on the Hetch Hetchy Water Project, which includes building water towers and tunnels, and constructing the concrete pipes for the pipeline. San Joaquin staff first learned about this project through their relationship with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission. Had the program not been open to projects besides residential construction, they would not have had these opportunities.

6. Provide students with proper training and follow-up.

Partnerships with unions, particularly those that lead to student placement, are sustainable only if graduates succeed in these placements. In order to succeed, students need the proper academic and worksite experience while in YouthBuild, as well as support and follow-up from YouthBuild staff. Before entering apprenticeship programs, students should receive enough exposure to the apprenticeship program to be able to determine whether or not they are interested, and they should be made fully aware of the program's requirements. It is the role of YouthBuild to prepare students for apprenticeship opportunities and to help them determine if it is the right career path for them.

From the Field

Portland YouthBuilders: Bill Kowalczyk explained the steps students go through in Portland to prepare for entrance into an apprenticeship program:

- Students are exposed to the industry and to apprenticeship programs from the beginning. Part of their pre-program challenge (Mental Toughness) involves meeting with apprenticeship coordinators.
- Towards the end of the initial phase of the program, students begin thinking about whether or not they would like to pursue construction as a career path. They meet with a construction placement

coordinator to help them decide which trade they are most interested in and which best fits their personalities and skills.

- During the third phase of the program, students commit to pursuing the construction career path. Those who choose this path and who want to join apprenticeship programs must achieve higher skill levels in construction than the baseline required of all students. Those students achieve pre-apprenticeship certification that will qualify them for direct entry. Part of this certification involves being a job lead on the construction site.

Further Reading

Conway, Maureen and Allison Gerber. "Construction Pre-Apprenticeship Programs: Results from a National Survey." *The Aspen Institute*, July 2009. <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/construction-pre-apprenticeship-programs-results-national-survey>.

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