Opening Career Pathways for Young People

Workforce Development Strategies for YouthBuild Programs, Charter Schools, and Other Youth Organizations

Produced by YouthBuild USA under a Technical Assistance Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
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About YouthBuild USA

Founded in 1990, YouthBuild USA is a national nonprofit organization that works to unleash the positive energy of low-income youth to rebuild their communities and lives. It supports an expanding nationwide network of 226 local Youthbuild programs. In this role, YouthBuild USA orchestrates advocacy for public funding, guidance and quality assurance in program implementation, leadership opportunities for youth and staff, research to understand impact and best practices, and grants and loans to YouthBuild USA affiliates. YouthBuild USA leads the national Youthbuild movement and contributes to the broader youth and community development fields in order to diminish poverty in the United States and internationally. For more information, visit www.youthbuild.org.
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The development of this publication represents the collective efforts of many YouthBuild USA staff and consultants working with YouthBuild USA’s Career Development Initiative (CDI), an effort to research, identify, test, and disseminate effective practices that support the economic sustainability of young people. Jerry Kolker, in particular, has been instrumental in encouraging YouthBuild USA to give more attention to career development strategies. He contributed key ideas to this handbook. Dorothy Stoneman provided important input on the content and edited the text. Lissette Rodriguez edited the text and provided overall management to the project. Peter Twichell wrote the text and oversaw the development of the handbook. Caroline Hopkins, Jennifer Clammer, Daryl Wright, Laurie Bennett, Alan Gumbel, Bethany Chaney, Kim Phinney, and Twain Peebles each provided important comments on the concepts and the approach. Rebecca Razavi provided input on the concepts and edited the text. Marcia Gray oversaw the design and production of the handbook.

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Introduction

This handbook is for teachers, trainers, counselors, case managers, career advisors, program managers, executive directors, school principals, and anyone else working to get low-income, low-skilled young people onto career pathways toward economic security and sustainability. Its central purpose is to provide youth organizations, especially YouthBuild programs, with a strategy for getting graduates onto viable career paths in employment sectors that offer economic promise. The handbook focuses on creating an organizational culture of career development and on the specific program building blocks that can lead to graduate success. The book is organized into four parts:

**Part One**
Explains challenges and opportunities present for young people and programs that work to support them.

**Part Two**
Describes a conceptual framework to guide career development design, planning, and implementation.

**Part Three**
Provides practical approaches and effective practices—based on the framework described in Part Two—that programs can use to open career pathways for young people.

**The Appendix**
Provides some basic resources, sample documents, and useful Web sites.
The approach presented here is a comprehensive, integrated strategy that incorporates and complements a wide range of other youth development priorities including academic education, leadership development, civic engagement, service learning, life skills development, and health and well-being. Career development fits naturally as an element in any positive youth development strategy and actually benefits from a wide range of program activities that do not necessarily appear to relate directly to career development. However, at the same time, experience has shown that successful career development and work readiness programs do focus intensively on preparation for work throughout every aspect of the program and make career success a top priority for staff and students.

This handbook is a resource for strategic planning, program design and planning, program management, and staff orientation and training. We recommend that you first read through the entire handbook to understand the overall strategy being presented, and then decide what elements to bring into your organization.

Effective career development demands more of youth organizations than traditional approaches to vocational education, employment training, and job placement. Below are the stories of two recent graduates whose names have been changed from two different youth organizations. Compare their experiences and prospects for long-term economic success. What elements in the stories seem especially important to opening a career pathway for a young person?

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1 This publication is not a job-readiness curriculum since well-designed instructional material for young people already exists. A comprehensive review of such curricula can be found in YouthBuild USA’s publication Career Development Curricula Review, available, along with an electronic version of this publication, at www.youthbuild.org/publications.
"Mary"

Mary graduated from a youth program that had high outcomes in GED attainment and job placement but little focus on career development. After a lot of hard work over the nine-month program, Mary earned her GED, and the program helped her find a job in a warehouse. At first, she was happy to be working, but it didn’t take long before the tediousness and low wages began to wear on her. She left work one day and never went back. After a few months, and with the help of the program staff, Mary was able to find another job—but with the same results. Discouraged and needing a new direction, she decided to try to go back to school to earn an associate’s degree. With renewed optimism yet no clear goal, Mary proudly enrolled in two summer school classes. After two weeks, overwhelmed with taking classes four days a week, Mary dropped one class. After another two weeks, the homework and reading piled up, and she dropped the second class. Completely demoralized, Mary had no idea what her next step should be, so she began looking for another job.

"Cal"

During Cal’s year-long education and training program, he had decided to pursue a career in culinary arts. His career counselor had given him a skills assessment that helped him identify culinary arts early in the year. Cal also used a two-day job shadow and a month-long internship to test his interest in the field. He left the program with his GED, a plan for attending school while working part time, and a good understanding of how to work up a career lattice. Soon after graduation, he entered a 90-week culinary arts program, working part time as a prep chef at a café while earning his degree. After graduation, Cal continued to work at the café, and began working at a catering company as well. Although he performed well at the catering company, Cal became increasingly bothered by the attitudes of the owners. Coached by staff from his training program, Cal gave two weeks notice and was able to leave on good terms. He secured the same type of position in the catering department of a country club and worked there for more than a year before moving to a job with more responsibility at a golf club. Cal enjoyed the presentation aspect of catering and decided to pursue a degree in art to enhance his skills while he continued to work at the club. After a semester, Cal dropped out, realizing that the degree would not take him in the direction he wanted to go. He remained with the club and took a second job with a catering company. Although very busy with the two jobs, Cal began using the catering kitchen in his off hours to prepare foods for his own catering jobs. Based on his success with catering, Cal is currently considering starting his own catering business.
Part 1

Preparing for Work in the Twenty-first Century
Overview

Anyone working with young people today knows how much they need and want access to career opportunities that draw on their talents, skills, interests, and experience. Young people are eager to take responsibility for themselves and their families, and want to contribute to improving their communities. Meaningful, community-oriented work on career tracks that provide a path out of poverty empower young people to live up to their responsibilities, follow their dreams, and give back to their communities. A billion young people will seek to enter the global workforce in the coming decade, according to the International Labor Organization, and the vibrancy, creativity, generosity, and productivity of these new workers will shape the twenty-first century.

Career development that builds toward economic sustainability for young people who are at risk of being unemployed or underemployed in their prime working years is critically important to our collective well-being. With workers aging out of the workforce in historic numbers, developing the economic potential of young people is an intergenerational obligation that, if left unfulfilled, will have long-ranging negative effects on society. We simply cannot afford to have one of our most vital resources—capable, committed, hard-working young adults—absent from the economic, social, civic, and political processes of our communities.

Young people face a vastly different world of work than their parents or grandparents faced. Gone are many of the entry-level jobs in agriculture and manufacturing that, for generations, gave young people a foothold in the economy. Many of the barriers to getting low-income youth into decent work seem almost insurmountable and render traditional job training and vocational education approaches nearly obsolete. The deep needs of many young people coupled with changing economic forces demand that organizations from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors collaborate in new ways to build bridges between young people and the labor market. Employers need good new workers as urgently as young people need economic
opportunities, but creating the connections between them is more challenging than ever before.

To open career pathways, youth organizations must cultivate strategic partnerships to influence community economic development and job creation, to advocate for their graduates in the labor market, and to shape local policies related to education, training, and workforce development. Young people must learn to think strategically so they can adjust to rapid economic changes and opportunities around them. Schools and youth organizations must provide holistic, comprehensive responses to the many developmental needs of young people—even when career development is the top priority—so they gain not only technical work skills but also the life skills and soft skills so essential for success. In today’s workplace, leadership skills, confidence, emotional well-being, reliability, flexibility, good health, and interpersonal abilities are as important as technical capabilities.

With the right preparation and ongoing support, young people can get into good careers that correspond to their interests and talents. Modern industrialized economies around the world offer plenty of entry-level work on career paths in traditional fields such as construction and health care and in new fields such as information technology, bio-mechanics, geo-spatial technology, advanced manufacturing, and “green” industries. Despite this economic promise, there is concern among researchers, economists, educators, policy experts, and youth workers that the gap is widening between these opportunities and the skills of many young people, preventing them from getting into much of the available entry-level work in the modern economy.

The Skills Challenge

In the United States in 1950, 20 percent of jobs were considered “skilled” by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. By 2005 that number was 85 percent. Computers and telecommunications, multicultural project teams, new decision-making processes, and other changes in the workplace have redefined the skills required of workers. Most jobs today require workers to communicate effec-
tively and problem-solve using advanced technical skills that typically require postsecondary education. Seventy percent of today’s jobs, by some estimates, require postsecondary education—that is, education that leads minimally to a professional credential but not necessarily a two- or four-year degree. Many sectors such as auto repair and clerical work that historically offered good entry-level opportunities for low-skilled workers now demand specialized technical training and some postsecondary education. Opportunities in advanced manufacturing are not so much in machine shops and factories but are often in sleek, climate-controlled, high-tech laboratories that require workers with advanced technical skills and postsecondary training. The growing service sectors such as hospitality and health care rely on well-developed interpersonal skills and an orientation toward service.

Further compounding the skills challenge is the increased competition among low-skilled workers that is generated by the global economy. Young people today, especially those with minimal education and training, must now compete with workers from around the world. Who would have imagined a generation ago that telephone operators from the other side of the globe would help service home computers and appliances or that timber jobs in rural communities would vanish as timber companies ship trees overseas for milling?

Reasons for Optimism

Increased global competition also brings positive changes for new young workers. Many employers are in desperate need of reliable, capable workers and are more willing to hire a diverse workforce than ever before. Employers are seeking diversity both to mirror their local communities and to build a workforce with cross-cultural capabilities. If a young person has a career plan; has gained basic knowledge, skills, and credentials; and gets adequate support, then barriers such as race, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and other factors are somewhat less likely to be obstacles today than for previous generations.

Also, youth culture, with its attention to electronic communications, digital media, social networking, new technology, marketing, entertainment, multiculturalism, and other social forces, gives young people fluency in the
twenty-first century marketplace and positions them to capitalize on emerging opportunities in the new economy in ways that may be difficult for older workers. Careers in the twenty-first century offer young people many opportunities for safe, meaningful, well-paying work that supports long-term economic well-being and allows them to contribute to the betterment of their families and communities. And while there may be less stability in careers today, there is also more flexibility and more opportunity to pursue work of one’s choosing. The good news is that young people who are equipped with strong career management skills will be able to move up income ladders and also will move laterally pursing their interests into new realms that build on their skills, experience, interests, and credentials.

The Essential Role of Continuing Education and Training

Postsecondary education and training programs, primarily at community colleges, will facilitate much of the career change and advancement that young people experience. The skills and credentials provided by postsecondary education are now more important to the economic prospects of young people than ever before. These educational institutions provide the upgrading of skills that is essential in a dynamic economy, where the demands of work change rapidly. Every young person’s career plan must include some contact with postsecondary institutions; otherwise, she or he is likely to miss the training necessary for career advancement. Today more than six million students, nearly half of all college undergraduates, are enrolled in community colleges, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Another five million students are enrolled in workforce training programs at community colleges. For low-income, low-skilled youth, postsecondary education can be a fruitful path to better lives. Between 2004 and 2014, 2.7 million new jobs for carpenters, nurses, customer services representatives, maintenance workers, and other skilled workers will be created that require a postsecondary credential but not a college degree, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Fostering lifelong learning is a goal for many youth organizations, and increasingly these organizations are forging partnerships with community colleges that provide for college advising, campus visits, enrollment in degree classes while in the youth program, financial aid, and college clubs (peer support) for graduates. Most college students, and especially low-income students, must work while they are enrolled in postsecondary programs.
Fortunately, the skills necessary to be successful in work—time management, team work, computer use, problem solving, research, communication—are many of the same skills required to succeed in higher education. The job of youth programs is to help graduates build these skills along with a support system to balance work and school. Innovative youth programs have increased the success of their graduates in college by sending them in peer support clusters to the same institution.

**The Goal of Career Development: Economic Security and Sustainability**

Economic security and sustainability means that graduates are in stable housing, are safe, have access to health care, are supporting themselves and their families, and are engaged in activities such as service, worship, recreation, and leisure. More broadly, it also means that graduates have access to savings and credit so that they are able to invest in their future through home mortgages, school loans, business financing, and retirement accounts. Building these long-term assets depends on sustained, well-paying employment over the long term. For this reason, economic sustainability requires that graduates be competitive within the economy over time so they are able to move out of poverty and into productive roles within their communities.

Placing a young person onto a career path that offers economic sustainability is a daunting task. After all, finding a true career can take many years, and most people change careers several times. Youth programs will not necessarily place graduates into careers, but they must ensure that each graduate has a career strategy, or a plan, to find and hold meaningful work over her or his lifetime.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2008, full-time work at the federal minimum wage earned $13,624 a year, not nearly enough to keep a young family above the poverty line. For a young person to become economically secure, career strategies must seek consistent income growth. Studies have shown that workers with some postsecondary training can achieve income growth that will begin to lift them out of poverty. This requires not only the ability to find and keep work but also the motivation, the credentials, and the skills to capitalize on opportunities to move into better positions.
“Better positions” are not necessarily promotions up a career ladder within a particular industry. Successful graduates will find new opportunities by progressing up and across career lattices that allow for both advancement within a particular industry and for lateral changes across sectors. Unfortunately, by contrast, graduates who are placed into low-paying jobs and who lack career development skills will, over time, face significant challenges to improving their income, making them vulnerable to long-term poverty and the negative forces of the street.

Drawing on research from the community college system on the economic impact of postsecondary education, we can begin to chart a general path out of poverty and toward economic security that is open to many hard-working, low-income, low-skilled young people. While not all young people will follow this pathway exactly, they all will benefit from an understanding of the progression. Therefore, youth programs should keep these steps in mind as they help graduates reach their career goals:

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1 Prince, D., and Jenkins, D., "Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Statewide Longitudinal Tracking Study." Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2005.
The critical elements in this pathway are worth noting: most important is the completion of a secondary education credential; next is the completion of some postsecondary education or training through community colleges, trade unions, vocational-technical training schools, or other credentialing institutions; third is a job in a high-growth industry; and fourth is the ongoing need for credentials upgrades through additional postsecondary education. Sustaining a student’s effort throughout the process is support from the youth program staff, mentors, family, and partner agencies, providing specific services such as child care, transportation, financial aid, counseling, and housing. Additionally, it is important to remember that most students in postsecondary education and training programs must work part-time, and often full-time, while in school.
Part 2

A Conceptual Framework for Career Development
Overview

So far, we’ve examined the environment in which graduates will be pursuing careers and the role of youth programs in supporting those careers. Now we’ll look at a conceptual framework—the “Three P’s” and “Six A’s”©—to support program success.

The Three P’s for Career Success

1. Program Culture

Successful youth programs have a distinct culture that supports career development. YouthBuild USA’s research identified strong program culture as a critical element for success on many performance measures, including those related to career development. Program culture, interestingly, is not defined as any one particular organization type but rather a consistent, unified, integrated, and authentic set of principles, assumptions, attitudes, rituals, and daily practices that result in effectiveness.

Program culture unifies the entire organization in its orientation toward successful education and career outcomes for graduates so young people feel
that the organization or program has a stake in their future. This culture is reflected in organizational priorities, executive functions, program design, staff roles and responsibilities, recruitment of participants, program activities, daily rituals, the look of the facility, marketing and communication, evaluation measures, and, most important, the experience of young people.

Here are some core principles found in many effective youth programs and that build a culture of success for graduates. You may recognize some of these from your own organization or program:

- **Commitment**—each young person feels the staff is knowledgeable and has a genuine stake in her or his economic success.
- **Respect**—the program respects the needs, concerns, and intelligence of young people.
- **Community Connections**—each young person can see that the program has connections to organizations, networks, and systems that offer real economic opportunities.
- **Ongoing Support**—the program provides consistent and long-term support to make positive change and to overcome barriers to employment.
- **Leadership**—the organization’s senior leader advocates for young people in the community, plays a role in community economic development, and influences policy related to education, training, and workforce development.
- **Integration**—career preparation is integrated throughout the program from the first day and attachment to work and postsecondary education is established early in the program.
- **Knowledge and Skill Development**—the program fosters a spirit of lifelong learning and advancement and teaches an array of marketable skills that support career development.
- **Experiential Learning**—young people have well-supervised, engaging, hands-on skills training and work experience that accurately simulates work life.
- **Authenticity**—students participate in work-based learning, and career development activities are driven by both the needs and interests of young people and by current workplace demands.
2. Partnerships with Key Stakeholders

Contacts outside the program are essential to getting young people into the demand-side of the workforce system where career opportunities exist. Establishing these contacts is uniquely the role of the adults working with young people because students typically have little or no access to this realm. Young people, especially low-income youth, often have none of the social networks so essential to career development that more privileged youth and most adults take for granted. These networks built over generations and based on race, class, religion, family, and other affiliations can be nearly invisible to the people who benefit from them. Meanwhile, young people without networks may not know how to begin building such contacts. The youth program, in effect, becomes the wider social network, the “who you know,” for its participants. The challenge facing youth programs is that, within a year or less, they must connect each student to a network that more privileged people often spend a lifetime cultivating. In building a network, key contacts for youth programs include:

- Postsecondary education and training institutions
- Industry-supported training and apprenticeship organizations
- Unions, trade associations, and other organizations
- Individual youth-friendly employers
- Employment support services (health care, child care, placement service, etc.)
- Mentors
- Successful graduates from the program

Workforce Development Partners

Youth programs must connect with strategic partners in the workforce development system. This system touches nearly every sector of society and includes a vast array of public, private, and nonprofit organizations providing education, training, research, curricula, credentials, apprenticeships, support services, mentoring, policy development, advocacy, and jobs. Four specific segments of the workforce development system are particularly important to youth development programs:
Employers, employer associations, and trade groups are important elements of the workforce system. Youth programs must find ways to connect to these organizations because they represent the demand side, the opportunity side, of the workforce development equation.

Unions and apprenticeship programs are important avenues into the skilled trades and can provide excellent placement opportunities.

Community colleges and other postsecondary institutions are significant entities within the workforce system, so it is essential youth programs make connections with them as a first step in improving career development.

Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) are regional entities that direct federal, state, and local funding to workforce development programs. They also conduct and publish research on these programs and the needs of their regional economy and oversee one-stop career centers, where job seekers can get employment information and connect to programs in their areas. WIBs are important within the workforce system as planners, funders, and coordinators.

To engage successfully within the workforce development system, youth programs need to clearly understand where they fit within the system. Most schools and youth programs are considered “pre-employment” or “pre-apprenticeship” programs. As such, they introduce young people to work life and play an essential role in providing young people with the most fundamental skills for employability. It is the important work of youth programs to focus on social, emotional, and intellectual competencies, including soft skills, leadership development, basic education, emotional well-being, health, and basic technical skills. Young people from low-income communities typically face numerous barriers to success that go beyond the need for technical training. Youth programs are especially well-suited for this type of focus as it requires a nurturing developmental process that supports participants as they overcome obstacles and cultivate essential career skills.

Many employers prefer to provide the technical training, the “hard skills,” required of their workers, but these employers typically are unprepared to provide the basic skills preparation needed to introduce minimally skilled, inexperienced young people into the work place. Thus, it is not necessary for youth organizations to provide intensive hard skills training for graduates to
launch successful careers because much of this training can be found through partners such as trade unions.

**Community Economic Development Partners**

Many successful youth organizations not only partner with workforce development partners but also step into the broader realm of community economic development. These youth programs, frequently tied to larger agencies, possess the leadership, capacity, and resources to influence comprehensive strategies for neighborhood revitalizations and community development that typically include economic development, housing, public safety, education and training, and, of course, workforce development. In rural communities especially, where there is a severe absence of career opportunities, some youth programs have sought to broaden their influence so that they can participate in the actual creation of jobs, labor markets, and entrepreneurial opportunities. While this strategy is ambitious, there are ample reasons for youth organizations to seek this level of influence within their communities if they are seeking to open career pathways for their graduates.

**Policy Partners**

Youth programs may also seek influence within the policy realm as a strategy to open career pathways. This policy work typically relates directly to community economic development and workforce development, but it is a further example of the ways organizations can support the economic prospects of young people. Involvement in policy development requires strong commitment and engagement from the organization’s senior leadership.

### 3. Preparation of Individuals for Careers

Once an organizational culture focused on career success has been created and a network of external partners has been established, the youth program needs to prepare students for opportunities that have been identified through the partnerships.

The process of preparation must provide a comprehensive response to the various social, academic, emotional, physical, and financial needs of individual young people. When low-income students fail to carry out their career plans, it is not usually because they lack motivation or technical skills; typically, it’s because they face other obstacles like behavior problems, lack of transportation, substance abuse, family troubles, shortage of funds, or poor interpersonal skills. Preparation for work life must include a comprehensive plan to clear away barriers to employment, build career assets, provide supports for positive change, create a support network for times of crisis, and increase
competence on a wide range of skills. For the sake of planning this essential aspect of your program, it may be useful to review the five competencies required of workers articulated by the U.S. Department of Labor Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS):

- Resources: identifies, organizes, plans, and allocates resources
- Interpersonal: works with others
- Information: acquires and uses information
- Systems: understands complex interrelationships
- Technology: works with a variety of technologies

A Dual-Customer Approach

Most youth development activity—education, training, civic engagement, sports and recreation, health care, counseling, service learning, social activities, and religious programs—is not directly connected to economic activity or to the labor market. Rather, it is designed to serve the young person, who is in effect “the customer” of the youth organization.

A “dual-customer” approach goes one step further and incorporates the needs of employers into the preparation of students. This approach explicitly links people who are looking for employment to known employers who are looking for qualified workers to fill job vacancies. In the world of career development, this dual-customer approach provides a business perspective that is sometimes missing from programs designed to serve youth.

The labor market is a supply-and-demand equation with the supply of available workers on one side and the demand for workers on the other. Schools and youth programs typically operate entirely on the supply side of the equation. The term “career development,” which focuses on cultivating the potential and well being of individual workers, has traditionally reflected a supply-side orientation. The demand-side perspective is referred to as “workforce development.” The goal of workforce development is

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**Where Are the Careers?**

- **Health care** sector is projecting labor shortages for the next two decades.
- **Construction** industry needs 1 million new workers by 2012, a 15 percent increase.
- **Information technology**, the fastest growing sector, will add 632,000 jobs, an 18 percent increase, by 2012.
- **Retail trade** will add nearly 600,000 jobs, a 15 percent increase, by 2012.
- **Advanced manufacturing** will add more than 400,000 jobs by 2012.
- **Automotive industry** needs 240,000 workers by 2012.

—**U.S. Department of Labor**
to amass the labor necessary to meet the needs of employers and fuel economic activity. However, the goals of career development and workforce development are intertwined since the well-being, satisfaction, and productivity of workers directly affects the productivity of business and industry.

Without direct access to the workforce development system—through partnerships, internships, mentors, and jobs—youth programs can find it difficult to link young people to opportunities in the local economy. This disconnection and isolation from the demand side of the equation has been the failing of many youth employment programs and vocational education systems, hence the call for “demand-driven” training.

Most of the demand for workers is in “high-growth” sectors such as construction, health care, and information technology. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 2002 and 2012, eight of the ten fastest growing occupations in America will be related to health care, such as medical assistants, home health aides, physical therapist assistants, medical records technicians, and physician assistants.

While these are the current sectors experiencing growth, we live in a volatile economy, where specific skills that are needed today may not be those that are in demand tomorrow. For this reason, it is important for programs to keep abreast of changes in employment trends and to focus on basic skills.

Also, the term “sector” typically refers to a large swath of economic activity that can represent many different types of work. For this reason, it is important for youth programs to understand the types of jobs available within sectors. For example, when the U.S. Department of Labor reports that in the coming decade there will be a million new jobs in the construction sector, that projection includes not only trades jobs but also an incredibly wide range of non-trades jobs in real estate, interior decorating, landscaping, transportation, architecture, clerical, and other subsectors that support construction activity. Many of the subsectors include small businesses, which are an excellent source of entry-level work for young people. As youth organizations analyze regional economic trends, it is important to define not only high growth sectors but also subsectors and related small business clusters to identify prospective placements for graduates. And as mentioned above, transferable basic skills give young people the most flexibility in navigating this diverse economic landscape.
Six A’s: Essential Strands of Career Development Activity

Woven throughout any effective career development program are six strands of ongoing, simultaneous activity that occur at various levels within the organization. These strands should guide the actions of staff, shape the program curricula, be present for the duration of the program, and be reflected in a wide range of activities within the organization. (Specific activities associated with each of the strands are listed in the Six A’s Program Checklist in the Resources section of this handbook.) The six strands of activity mostly occur within the Preparation and Partnerships elements of the framework:

Preparation of Individuals for Careers

1. **Assessment** of skills, interests, capabilities, credentials
2. **Alignment** with known opportunities
3. **Asset Building** (skills, knowledge, credentials, contacts, mentors, financial resources)

Partnerships with Key Stakeholders

4. **Access** to systems, networks, institutions, employers
5. **Attachment** to school, work, mentors, and supports
6. **Advocacy and Advising** to provide long-term support for graduates

1. **Assessment**

A career development plan starts with a solid baseline assessment to identify the student’s interests, aspirations, qualifications, and capabilities. If students understand well the gap between their aspirations and their qualifications, they are better focused, better motivated, and ultimately more successful.

It is also essential that ongoing assessment tools be integrated into the program to ensure the student is progressing along the plan. Effective career development planning demands measurable progress along academic, behavioral, and technical competencies. It is critical for both the staff and the young person to remain focused on meeting the benchmarks outlined in the development plan.
2. Alignment

Alignment is an ongoing process of ensuring that a young person is progressing along a developmental plan that increasingly positions her or him for a known opportunity within the local economy. From a programmatic standpoint, alignment must begin with an examination of regional economic data that pinpoints trends in job gains/losses, emerging sectors, community college activities, and other important career-related research. Youth programs that do not design activities in alignment with actual economic information run the risk of misdirecting young people. (Steps for conducting a market scan of the local employment landscape are described later in this handbook.)

Once students have assessed their aspirations, qualifications, and skills gap, they must research careers open to them. Where do they want to target their efforts? At the same time, it is the task of the program staff to seek out realistic career opportunities within the community that are a good match in terms of qualifications and aspirations. Many tools exist that enable students to research their own career interests (see the Resources section of this handbook).

3. Asset Building

What makes one person more competitive than another in the job market? It is the assets that they bring to the workplace. Assets for work are clustered into four categories:

- Physical (car, clothes, tools, books)
- Financial (savings, scholarships, loans, gifts)
- Human (knowledge, skills, attitude, emotional intelligence)
- Social (networks, relationships, contacts, mentors)

Nearly everything a young person experiences in a strong youth program builds assets for career development. It is important for students to become aware of all that they are achieving within the program that can contribute to their work life.
4. Access

Once opportunities have been identified and students are aligned with those opportunities, the program should establish mechanisms that enable students to actually gain access to those opportunities. This is not an easy task, however. Often those in the private sector do not even know about youth programs. Compounding this problem are skills gaps, negative stereotypes of youth, the lack of a social network, and discrimination, which all conspire to prevent young people from gaining access to the labor market. It is critical, however, that these obstacles be addressed and overcome; youth programs that cannot open access to economic partners and opportunities offer limited utility to young people—and quickly lose credibility with students themselves.

Much of the responsibility of opening access outside of the program starts with the executive director, board of directors, or principal. It is the organization’s executive staff that must devote time and energy to opening lines of communication, resources, contacts, and opportunities within the community. They need to sit on the boards of Rotary clubs and trade associations and have a seat at the table of a number of relevant local organizations. Members of boards of directors can also play an important role in opening these doors, as can successful graduates.

Everyone involved in a student’s individual career plan—the student, the mentor, the case manager, and the employer—has a role in assuring access to opportunities and needs to know what is expected of them. Getting the student into contact with the people and organizations that will eventually play a role in the career plan ensures that everyone, especially the student, has clear expectations.

Access also entails formal and informal activities such as inviting employers into the program as guest speakers, bringing union journeymen in as trainers, and creating articulation agreements that provide community college classes to be taught within the youth program. The purpose is to put students into direct contact with the labor market stakeholders and systems to build familiarity and rapport—for both youth and adults—so
that there can be a smooth transition from the program to the next step on the career path.

5. Attachment

Once access to external partners and resources has been established for students, there must be a deliberate process of attaching them to those outside contacts. Attachment ensures that the bridge to opportunity is completed for each young person, and it completes the process of transitioning out of the program. Solid attachments are created over time for young people through repeated contacts. For this reason, it is important for youth programs to introduce work experience, employers, unions, colleges, mentors, and other resources early in the program and frequently. When attachment is established incrementally through repeated positive experiences, developmentally appropriate connections are established. Here are several examples of how programs have helped facilitate these attachments:

- Integrating college curricula, college credit, and time on campus into ongoing program activities is an excellent way for young people to build attachment to postsecondary education.

- Integrating both work and school into a student’s weekly or monthly schedule can help to firmly establish the bridge out of the program and on to both a job and postsecondary training.

- Introducing employers, union representatives, and mentors early in the program so that students become familiar and comfortable with these key contacts.

6. Advocacy and Advising

Youth workers can become discouraged when they realize that their efforts to get students onto career pathways do not necessarily end on graduation day. Even with good solid attachments to work and postsecondary education, young people typically need a lot of support to overcome the challenges of leaving the nurturing world of the program.

Indeed, the follow-up advocacy and advising that the staff provides to graduates and to employers of graduates is, in some ways, the most important aspect of the career development framework. Graduates can feel overwhelming stress as they pursue their career plans without the daily support of the
program. Juggling work and school, family responsibilities and crises, and other adult concerns without the regular close contact of their peers and the program staff can isolate and demoralize even the best prepared graduates. Youth programs must establish and maintain a high level of engagement with each graduate to provide encouragement, refocusing, problem solving, and other supports.

The program can continue to advocate for its graduates also by helping them understand their responsibilities to employers, mentors, and other career supports. This can help them to set realistic expectations, smooth out problems at work, and ensure that they remain attached to their supports. Some programs such as YouthBuild have set up systems to provide financial support for graduates to weather debilitating crises beyond their control.

A broader interpretation of advocacy relates to the perceptions of young people within the workforce development system and at the policy level. Some youth programs find that workforce stakeholders such as employers, Workforce Investment Boards, or unions do not always embrace them as significant partners. Through outreach, advocacy, and partnership building, the role of youth development organizations can be elevated and more firmly established within the regional workforce system.
Part 3

Concepts into Action: Assembling Essential Building Blocks
Overview

Program staff can become overwhelmed by the crush of daily responsibilities of running a school or youth program. Conceptual frameworks can fade and seem irrelevant in the face of the fast-paced activities of a youth organization. What should the staff focus on to stay tethered to the overarching goals of career development? This section highlights the building blocks for meeting your program’s daily and long-term career development goals within the Conceptual Framework of the Three P’s and the Six A’s.

Building Blocks of Program Culture

Designate Staff for Career Development

It is essential for youth organizations to designate staff to plan, coordinate, and monitor career development activities. Many programs commonly are forced, due to budget constraints, to relegate career development to one staff person, such as a teacher or counselor, who has numerous other responsibilities. A much more effective approach, given an adequate budget, is to include a career advisor or transition manager on the staff team to coordinate the entire career development strategy for the program and to act as an employer liaison within the community. The designation of staff to career development sends a strong message to young people of the importance of career development within the overall organization. It should not, however, obscure the importance of executive leadership also playing a role in strategic planning and building contacts for access.

Orient and Train All Staff for Alignment to Career Development Outcomes

Creating alignment and agreement among the staff on career development goals and activities is essential prior to program start-up. While individual staff members may have vastly different ways of working with young people, they must be unified in their commitment to help get young people onto career pathways. Staff orientation training or a retreat can be designed using this handbook
as a guide so that everyone on the team understands the overall strategy and her or his place within it. The staff should remember that every interaction with a young person—a case management meeting, a class discussion, a community service project—presents an opportunity to focus that student on career objectives and goals.

The staff team should be fully aware of the career development plan for each individual so learning can be tailored to each student’s needs and aspirations. For example, a young person who is working toward a career in the trades must be given ample opportunities to study math and practice using it in work activities. Likewise, a student focused on entering community college must be especially supported in improving reading skills.

Positive, caring, respectful relationships between individual staff and individual students help to establish one of the most important principles of effective program culture—that is, that young people know and feel that the staff has a stake in their economic future. These relationships also provide students with a way to practice the employee–employer relationships that are central to success at work.

The staff also plays an important role in reaching out to potential employers, private sector representatives, and potential mentors. The personal network of each individual staff person represents an incredibly valuable resource to the program as it works to establish the key partnerships within its overall career development strategy. But the staff usually is not willing to engage their personal networks until they can be assured that the program will produce trusted, competent graduates who can make a positive impression in work and community life. For this reason, the board of the organization along with the senior managers should work to build staff buy-in by articulating an
organizational commitment to the economic success of graduates, outlining a clear and comprehensive strategy for getting graduates on career pathways, and allocating adequate resources to support the effort.

Engage the Entire Organization

Ideally the entire organization is invested in career development and the success of its graduates. This kind of intensive organizational engagement sends a powerful message to students, conveys a clear mission to the community, and fosters a strong culture of career success. Establishing this kind of organizational focus can be difficult for youth programs that are embedded in large agencies or school districts. Career development advisory boards—described below under the partnership building blocks—composed of advisors, advocates, graduates, and experts from outside the organization can be a valuable tool for programs that operate within large agencies that are operating many other programs besides youth education and training.

Still, working to engage the entire organization, to whatever extent possible, is important. Below is a summary of the ways each member of a youth organization can contribute to graduate success.

Board Members

Members of the board of directors for the youth program can play an essential role in helping the executive director of the organization to cultivate external partners that can give graduates access to individuals and organizations that can provide internships, jobs, mentors, and other career supports. They can also enlist their own personal and professional networks to help build the networks that programs will need to help students enter the workforce. Occasionally, board members become mentors and advocates for individual young people, opening doors that normally would never have been accessible.

Executive Director/School Principal

Career development hinges on the involvement of the organization’s leader. Career development is an executive function in that it is closely linked to external partnerships, agreements with key stakeholders, and the overall reputation of the organization within the local workforce development system. The chief executive must be visible within the workforce system as both an advocate for young people and as a promoter of the importance and potential
of young people to respond to local workforce demands. The complex process of connecting young people to economic opportunities simply cannot be achieved if left entirely to the efforts of direct service staff.

**Program Manager/Assistant Principal**

Program managers and assistant principals play an essential role in integrating career development throughout the program. With the board and senior leader focused on external partnerships and the direct service staff focused on individual students, this staff role is to bring together the internal and the external elements of the program to ensure that program activities are grounded in the real demands of the workplace, consistent in their messages and expectations of students, and unified in their focus on career outcomes.

**Counselors/Case Managers**

Counselors and case managers should focus on work readiness and on removing the barriers young people face in getting on a career path. Health concerns, substance abuse, lack of housing, behavioral problems, personal hygiene, lack of transportation, family crises, and other problems can make it impossible for a young person to hold a job. Counselors and case managers can keep students focused on the basic requirements of employment and help them access support services.

**Teachers/Trainers**

Young people are most likely to thrive when teachers and trainers focus on the development of marketable skills and on gaining credentials that support careers. Of these credentials, the GED or high school diploma is the most important. Young people must complete secondary school to have any chance of securing their economic future. Teachers and trainers also play a critical role in teaching students the expectations of the workplace and postsecondary education. They create the laboratory for young people to practice new skills and behaviors. Work simulations in classrooms, on training sites, or in volunteer projects can be invaluable teaching activities. Teachers and trainers are essential in creating a “culture of work” within the program.

**Career Development Advisor/Transition Manager**

The most successful youth programs employ staff members that are dedicated specifically to career development activities. Teachers, trainers and counselors
certainly play a central role in developing career plans, but it is very important to have a staff person who is aware of how each student is progressing on career planning. Such a staff position can integrate the lessons from the work site and the classroom so that a young person’s experience leads to a smooth transition from the program to work. Transition advisors can guide students through advancement within the program and provide support services to graduates. This staff role also can follow up on and support the executive director’s work within the workforce system with the private sector, community colleges, and other partners.

**Introduce Career Development During Recruitment, Emphasize It During the Program, and Support It After Graduation**

Successful career development requires long-term, sustained attention from both students and staff. Short-term strategies typically don’t deliver the success that most youth organizations are seeking. Instead, the program should work toward a comprehensive approach that is introduced to young people when they apply to the program. They need to understand that, while the program will offer them a wide range of experiences, opportunities, and supports, a top priority will be getting them onto a promising career pathway. And, most important, they will be expected to focus much of their effort on preparing for life after the program.

Career exploration and research activities are good ways to engage young people in goal setting and career planning early in the program. Young people can be both overly optimistic about their prospects for work and overly narrow in their ideas of what might be available to them. For this reason, students should participate in career exploration that broadens their thinking about their own potential, sparks their interests, and at the same time gives them a realistic view of the world of work.

**Career Pathways**

**TIP**

**Use Community Service to Build an Ethic of Work**

Service to the community benefits young people in many ways, including helping them develop work-related values—a work ethic. Service can help a young person understand work as a contribution to others, not simply as a source of income. Service projects also enable students to learn about work processes, such as negotiating with partners, organizing materials, planning activities, troubleshooting, and directing teams. Volunteering can allow a student to practice working and remove the pressure of paid work that an inexperienced employee might feel. Community service is also a great resume builder for students and enables them to showcase their work ethic, develop work-related skills and experience, and come into direct contact with citizens who might later mentor or employ them.
of labor market opportunities. The Individual Career Plan (ICP), described in the “Building Blocks for Preparation of Individuals for Careers” section, is the tool for giving young people maps of their career aspirations.

After the interests of students have been sparked and outlined in a concrete plan, it is essential that the program use the plan to keep an intense focus on the career strategy. Throughout the program, students should revisit and update their plans, log their progress, celebrate achievements, and make adjustments. In all aspects of the program, students should be reminded of the ways in which their accomplishments will support their career plans. Likewise, students should be supported through the day-to-day challenges with constant reminders of the links between their current efforts and their long-term plans.

The transition after graduation out of the program and on to a placement in work and school can be a particularly difficult period for young people. Loneliness, discouragement, disillusionment, and a return to destructive habits are threats to graduates as they face the challenges of daily life outside the nurturing environment of the program. This transition period must be viewed as an important aspect of the organization’s career development strategy because many of the gains of the program can be lost if graduates are not well supported into the next phase of their lives. Alumni clubs, peer support groups, college clubs, mentors, grant programs for overcoming obstacles, and staff members who stay in close touch with graduates are important to keeping young people tethered to the supports of the program. Engaging graduates as guest speakers, peer counselors, and interns is a way to stay in close touch. Visiting graduates at their jobs or at college can be a way to deliver on-the-spot troubleshooting, counseling, and encouragement.

Building Blocks for Partnerships with Key Stakeholders

Conduct a Regional Economic Analysis and a Market Scan

Once a strong program culture has been established—one that can respond both to the developmental needs of young people and to the needs of the employer—the program must research the regional economy to determine where opportunities reside for graduates. The youth organization should
understand economic trends and be engaged in local policy discussions related to workforce development, education and training, and community economic development.

Here are the three key steps in conducting a market scan:

1. **Collect and analyze data to identify economic trends** and promising employment sectors. Data from the Workforce Investment Board, the local community college, the U.S. Department of Labor, or private research firms can provide valuable information on regional economic trends, which sectors are adding jobs and which ones are losing jobs, and how the regional economy is changing or creating new business opportunities.

2. **Talk to representatives from the most promising sectors** to get more specific information about opportunities and needs in these industries and to identify potential partners for your program. You might do this through interviews or **focus groups**. When gathering this information, think creatively about what you know about the surrounding region and ask questions about growth strategies being implemented by economic development professionals. And remember that the term “region” is not necessarily defined by state or even city lines, as opportunities for work may lie “across the border.”

3. **Use what you have learned** and resources you may have uncovered. You might form an advisory group with new sectoral partners. Advisory groups can be helpful in developing curricula and ensuring that your training and mentoring programs are responsive to the needs of the community. These groups can also go a long way toward educating workplace mentors and supervisors to youth programs, orienting students to career, as well as pathways and training requirements.

**Establish Agreements with Postsecondary Institutions**

A strong partnership with postsecondary education is essential because it provides access to industry-specific training resources, and it provides continuing education opportunities for graduates. In keeping with a demand-driven approach, youth programs should engage representatives from higher education institutions to work with program staff and industry advisory teams to identify core competencies, develop curriculum, and establish articulated
agreements on accredited coursework and tuition waivers. Youth programs can then offer classes that create links from the program to college and to work.

**Systematically Reach Out to the Private Sector**

One way that youth organizations can reach out to professionals in their communities is to use regional sectoral partnerships. These partnerships are industry-specific, regional solutions to employers’ needs for skilled workers and workers’ needs for good jobs. More specifically, for young people, these partnerships can open career pathways for new workers in specific high-demand sectors.

Regional sectoral partnerships bring together public sector, private sector, and nonprofit sector organizations in a collective approach to workforce development. The approach is intended to identify the root causes of labor shortages in a specific industry in a specific region and design solutions. Among the many solutions and strategies that are possible, a regional sectoral partnership can:

- Define formal career paths, ladders, and lattices
- Address barriers to employment
- Develop customized training programs
- Address recruitment and retention
- Provide ongoing knowledge sharing among the partners

Building meaningful partnerships can take a long time, but there are many benefits for doing so. For example, by focusing on multiple employers within a target industry, youth programs can develop a deep understanding of an industry’s needs, can better prepare young people for available career paths, and can share costs of training development.
Create an Advisory Board

Many youth programs are embedded in large agencies that have numerous priorities and obligations beyond career development for graduates. Establishing community partnerships can be challenging for the staff of the youth program when the agency’s executive leader and the board cannot be engaged in the effort. Advisory boards can be an effective way to build partnerships that provide most of the benefits of a more formal connection. However, because of the limited authority and influence of most advisory boards, considerable time and effort needs to be invested to ensure that the group functions effectively. It is important that advisory board members understand the benefit of their involvement and enjoy the experience. The youth program should recruit advisors who have a genuine interest in youth, are willing to volunteer time, lend their credibility to the youth program, and actively participate. Program staff should devote time to planning and organizing the work of the advisory board and include the advisors in important program meetings, events, graduations, and celebrations. A well-functioning advisory board can provide many of the essential connections to key workforce stakeholders such as community colleges, unions, and other employers.

Build a Bridge Between the Program and the Workplace or College

No matter how challenging students find their experience in your youth program, they will most likely find the transition out of your youth program even more challenging and probably more threatening. How can a program provide the support that is so critical to making a successful transition to economic sustainability? Two key elements are staff to help with this transition and program activities such as alumni clubs, peer support groups, and college clubs that are designed to support graduates after they leave the program.

Successful career development programs ensure that there is a staff person dedicated to supporting the graduates as they transition out of the program and a mentor that supports the transition into work life or college life. As far as is possible, onsite mentors, provided by the private sector partners or other partners, need to be steeped in the philosophy and approach of the youth program and understand the demands of work life. These mentors can provide critical support to young people as they transition from school to work. Mentors can also help graduates transition into postsecondary education, where they often face the challenges of working and studying at the same time. Mentors from any source need to be trained in their roles as supports for this transition.
Building Blocks for Preparation of Individuals for Careers

The Individual Career Plan: A Centerpiece of Career Development

Every student’s aspirations, no matter how ambitious or seemingly far-fetched, should be respected and cultivated and should be accompanied by a realistic step-by-step outline of what that student must actually achieve to reach his or her career goal. Students should be encouraged to become passionate about their career ambitions while also gaining the understanding of what will be required of them to realize their dreams.

To help young people establish themselves in a viable, sustainable manner, programs must focus on much more than job, internship, apprenticeship, or training program placement and instead work with young people to create long-term career strategies that reflect a clear understanding of the educational and technical skills necessary to remain competitive.

The first and possibly most important tool a career development program can provide to its young people is help in developing an individual career plan—to find and hold meaningful work that fills a need in the community and that meets the immediate and long-term needs of the student. Specifically, long-term strategies—or student career plans—require young people to:

- Identify their interests, capabilities, and qualifications
- Research, identify, and pursue opportunities that align with their interests, capabilities, and qualifications
- Use postsecondary education, training, and credentialing to build qualifications over a lifetime
- Secure, sustain, and change jobs to create a positive work history and income growth

Essential Elements in an Individual Career Plan (ICP)

- Student directed and staff supported
- Introduced early in the program
- Reflects the students needs, aspirations, talents, and goals
- Identifies specific short- and long-term career targets
- Outlines steps to overcome specific personal barriers to employment
- Emphasizes the development of basic skills and credentials related to literacy, numeracy, technology, and interpersonal skills
- Focuses on asset building and income growth
- Identifies specific credentials, training, and future education needed to move up career lattices
- Provides access to a network of external partners (employers, schools, mentors, supports)
- Establishes links to postsecondary education, training, and financial support
- Includes a “first job” entry and exit plan
- Plans for ongoing support and follow up
Youth programs that focus only on placement of graduates in the absence of developing long-term career strategies—or the realities of the job market—are unlikely to achieve the long-term outcome of economic sustainability. Likewise, career strategies that are bound too tightly to a young person’s current situation, and the current labor market, are unlikely to be successful in the long run. Instead, career plans need to focus on actions that will help young people attain new skills and experiences that will open doors to new opportunities as they arise.

**Ongoing Assessment to Track Progress**

The Individual Career Plan gives definition to a young person’s career aspirations and strategy, but it is the regular incremental progress toward career goals that really breathes life into the plan and motivates the student to continue working toward long-term goals and aspirations. Assessment—both formal and informal—is essential for staff to monitor the effectiveness of program activities and to make adjustments in time to alter the experience of students. Self-assessments by the students themselves are important in both documenting progress and in honestly identifying shortfalls. Young people can be unflinchingly accurate in their self assessments, and this information is invaluable in keeping a young person on a path to success.

Assessments such as the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), the National Work Readiness Credential, and the Employment Readiness Scale that identify academic, technical, or attitudinal skills gaps are useful in developing relevant Individual Career Plans and in guiding teachers, trainers, case managers, and counselors in crafting developmental plans for students.

Beyond identifying skills gaps and collecting performance data, assessment can be an important life skill for young people to become familiar with and adept at. Self-assessment is important in the workplace, as is the ability to absorb a supervisor’s assessment of one’s own performance.

**Career Pathways**

**TIP**

**Use Work to Draw Young People Back to School**

As young people gain experience in jobs, they quickly learn that more training and education translates directly into better work and better income. This wake-up call to the limitations of their own qualifications often can draw young people back into school and training. Consider placing students into internships, job-shadowing, or part-time work early in the program so that they get a taste of work life while there is time in the program to re-engage with academic study.
Seek Rigorous Education Outcomes and Basic Skills Development

Youth programs seeking to put low-income, minimally skilled young people onto career pathways must bring an intense focus on basic education and the fundamental skills required for work. For these young people, gains in literacy, improved math skills, and especially the completion of high school or a GED are the first bricks in the foundation of economic sustainability. For this reason, education outcomes should be a top priority for youth programs. Many young people enrolling in YouthBuild and other youth-serving organizations enter at reading levels so low that completing a GED or diploma within the program cycle is difficult. Graduates who leave youth education and training programs without a GED or diploma should be placed immediately into further education and training that does enable them to complete this essential credential. A viable career strategy simply cannot be launched until a young person has completed her or his secondary education.

The next priority is the development of basic skills that will support a career. A basic skills curriculum should include soft skills—especially transferable skills—and also some basic technical skills that provide at least an introduction to a specific industry. It is not necessary for most youth programs to provide intensive technical skills training because much of this training can be gained later in postsecondary education, union apprenticeships, or in employer-sponsored training. But still an introduction to industry-specific technical skills and experiential training is important in finding a first job.

Teach Transferable Skills Guided by an Employer-Responsive Curriculum

With the data from a market scan and input from key partners, the youth program can convene a specific group of employers that have been identified from promising employment sectors. These advisors can be organized as a focus group or an advisory board to provide advice, guidance, and specific work-related information for the training curriculum. Inviting this input from employers can be one of the first steps in establishing more highly developed partnerships that include internships, workplace mentors, jobs for graduates, and possibly revenue for the youth program.
An employer-responsive curriculum need not distort the values or goals of an existing youth program. It may require a shift in emphasis, however, where certain skills are taught with a focus on positioning graduates for opportunities in a particular employment sector. In fact, this shift in perspective may open opportunities for greater involvement from community businesses and partners.

Here’s an example: A typical customer service curriculum for the retail or hospitality industries includes material on effective communication, anger management, problem solving, and leadership development—bedrock skills in any youth program. As youth organizations become reliable partners with the private sector and demonstrate the ability to effectively prepare young people for work, opportunities can emerge for the youth program to negotiate training contracts with employers.

With the curriculum in place, the program’s focus should be on skills development, especially measurable skills development that culminates in a work-related credential. While specific technical skills are important for any young person’s career advancement, particularly important are transferable skills—that is, basic computation, literacy, computer skills, problem solving, interpersonal communication, leadership ability, reliability, empathy, self-awareness, the ability to manage conflict, and other competencies required in any workplace. Transferable skills are the foundation of both entry-level employment and of career advancement for young people.

Success at work requires many of the same skills needed to succeed in any other aspect of one’s life—and many of these basic skills that employers are seeking in workers are routinely taught in schools and youth programs.

**Focus Students on Gaining Credentials for Work**

Lack of skills, experience, and credentials is an obstacle to career development for any young person. For this reason, much of a program’s career development activity should be designed to build a documented history of productivity, competence, and motivation for each young person. In the absence of actual work experience, credentials are an important way for inexperienced young people to document their skills and abilities.

**YouthBuild: A Proven Approach to Skills Training**

YouthBuild’s central focus on construction training is a strong model of an employer-responsive curriculum that teaches transferable skills. YouthBuild graduates can carry many of their skills from the construction site—teamwork, sequencing of tasks, safety, communication, problem solving, math calculations, and leadership, for example—directly into a wide range of career paths. These students can become well prepared for a variety of different careers while studying and practicing within the same training program and curriculum.
Credentials demonstrate discipline, focus, and persistence. Also, they document tangible competence in particular skills. For young people without work experience, credentials create the foundation of their qualifications.

Young people tend to respond well to the tangible, short-term focus required for many credentials, so they can be used throughout the program as motivators. Basic first aid and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) credentials, for example, can be gained within the first few weeks of a program and can then encourage young people to start working on more challenging credentials. NCCER or HBI trade credentials, CNA nursing credentials, IT certificates, and many other industry-specific credentials can be completed within the span of most youth programs. A driver’s license also is an important career-related credential, especially for young people in rural communities and for young people planning to work in the trades.

Unquestionably, the most important credential for students to complete as part of their career strategies is the GED or diploma. This credential is the cornerstone of any successful strategy for economic sustainability, and, as mentioned earlier, it is imperative that youth programs support students in completing their secondary education credential.

Career Development for Young People Convicted of a Crime

For young people convicted of a crime, career development requires special attention, knowledgeable staff, and thoughtful approaches. An entire handbook could be devoted to career strategies for these students, and youth organizations need to make specific preparations to properly serve youthful offenders. Below is some basic information to guide the program staff. For more detailed information, see the excellent publication *Going to Work with a Criminal Record* from Public/Private Ventures noted in the Resources section. While it focuses particularly on young fathers with criminal records, it has useful lessons for supporting any young person working to build a life after incarceration.

Young people who have been in conflict with the law face unique challenges to finding a career pathway, but with a strong develop-
mental plan, appropriate employer partners, and lots of support, they can overcome a negative past. A young person with a record must focus intensively on building a new track record of success, productivity, and responsibility. Gaining work-related credentials such as a GED, driver’s license, OSHA card, first aid certificate, PACT, NCCER, and other badges of achievement are essential. Logging time in community service and volunteer activities that demonstrate responsibility, leadership, and a work ethic also is important. Mentors who can support students both in the program and after graduation are essential for young people struggling to re-establish themselves in society. Also, graduates must be well prepared to communicate honestly with potential employers and coworkers about their criminal record.

*Going to Work with a Criminal Record* identifies seven important lessons in building career strategies for youthful offenders:

- **Lesson One: Do No Harm**—Avoid setting graduates up for failure by training them for jobs they cannot legally pursue and sending them to jobs from which they are barred.

- **Lesson Two: Tackling the Conviction Question and Offering Support**—Prepare participants to speak accurately, reassuringly, and as positively as possible when they need to disclose their convictions.

- **Lesson Three: Finding Willing Employers: Market Your Organization as Well as the Job Seeker**—Employers who are hesitant to hire graduates with criminal records may be more open if they can be assured that the youth organizations will stand behind the graduate and be available quickly should problems between the graduate and the employer arise.

- **Lesson Four: Consider Alternative Pathways into the Labor Market**—Permanent employment is the goal, but transitional or temporary jobs can be a first step to steady employment for those returning from prison and who may have scant work experience.

- **Lesson Five: Make Friends with Parole**—Recently incarcerated individuals will enter the program attached to a parole or probation officer. Complying with parole can affect a student’s ability to get and keep a job. Get to know parole officers personally, share pertinent information with them, and work together, if possible.
• **Lesson Six: Learn to Navigate the Child Support System**—Noncustodial parents may be reluctant to respond to child support enforcement because of the system’s perceived connections to courts, the legal system, or potential incarceration. They may also hesitate to take legitimate jobs knowing that their wages will be withheld to satisfy orders or pay arrearages. The program should support students in confronting their child support concerns and accompanying them to court to help negotiate arrearage repayment terms.

• **Lesson Seven: Take a Close Look in the Mirror**—Staff members may have preconceived ideas or negative attitudes that can affect the type and quality of services they make available to their formerly incarcerated participants. Providing training to discuss the issues that hobble students with a criminal record can both educate and sensitize staff.

**Early, Ongoing, Positive Exposure to the World of Work**

From the first day of the program, young people should be focused on their economic future and how strategic career development will serve them over their lifetime. A common mistake of youth organizations is to introduce career planning near the end of the program, conduct a few mock interviews, complete resumes, and put students in touch with prospective employers. This last-minute, incomplete treatment of career development doesn’t begin to respond to the complexities of today’s work world.

Successful youth programs, on the other hand, ensure that young people participate in numerous job shadows, short-term internships or community service, and then a long-term internship, possibly leading to part-time jobs. This early connection to work outside the protected environment of the program enables young people to try out various types of work, practice skills as soon as they are learned, and become familiar with work life. Moreover, the early exposure to the realities of work reinforces the value of the training program and can help attendance and retention.

When a young person is eager to work, is in need of immediate income, or is impatient with a training program, consider placing
the student into an appropriate, well-supervised paid work experience outside the program that satisfies his or her concerns but also reveals the value of the training, counseling, and classroom programs. An early experience of work running concurrently with other program activities can reinforce the importance of the program for the student. For some young people, an early work experience can build a stronger commitment to the overall program once the realities of the work place have been experienced firsthand.

Building a Portfolio of Career Assets

Preparing young people for careers is about building physical, financial, human, and social assets to support their long-term efforts. Career assets can be anything that support finding, keeping, and succeeding in work. It sends a powerful message when students see that all of their achievements within the program—from learning to use a phone book to completing their GED—build a portfolio they can draw on for the career development strategy. Thus, a strong career development program will clearly identify assets necessary for success, will provide numerous opportunities for students to gain assets, will continuously track progress toward goals, and will celebrate achievements to highlight individual gains.

Young people often see their achievements as disconnected, individual events rather than as an interwoven whole, so it is important for the staff to orient students to the idea that their goal is to build a **portfolio of career assets** that can be used later to support further education, training, and work. Young people experience a real sense of accomplishment when they see all their achievements in an ever-expanding portfolio.

Industry-Specific Skills Training

Basic education and training in life skills, soft skills, and work readiness competencies make the foundation for any effective career devel-
development program. With these fundamentals in place, some youth programs, such as YouthBuild, are able to add industry-specific technical training to provide a more comprehensive preparation for careers. If a youth organization has the expertise and capacity to include technical training on an authentic in-program work site, there are great advantages to students. In YouthBuild programs, young people spend half of their time in hands-on, experiential training in the construction trades building affordable housing.

This technical training provides students with an invaluable and authentic introduction to work life and can position them well for careers. A work site that is supervised and managed by the youth program can be a laboratory for young people to experience the realities of work in ways that cannot be taught in a classroom. It imbues a culture of work into the entire program because it places many of the same demands on students that they will experience outside the program, but at the same time provides the support and guidance that young learners need to thrive. Punctuality, productivity, teamwork, safety, problem solving, and planning can be practiced and experienced firsthand on an in-program work site. Meanwhile, the students are learning hard technical skills that can carry them directly into a career following graduation. The construction trades are particularly well suited for in-program work, but YouthBuild programs are also experimenting with health care and information technology training.

YouthBuild’s experience has also demonstrated that there are important lessons in experiential technical training for young people not intending to pursue careers in the trades. Many YouthBuild students take their year-long experience building houses and carry the benefits of the training into other careers outside the trades. Increased self-esteem, confidence, stamina, leadership skills, a commitment to service, familiarity with work processes, and a willingness to work hard—cultivated while on the construction site—serve YouthBuild graduates no matter where their career path leads.

**Career Pathways**

**TIP**

**Make GED or Diploma Completion the Top Priority**

No single achievement will affect a young person’s economic future more than gaining a secondary school credential. Without it, economic sustainability is virtually impossible. Numerous studies demonstrate that the lack of a GED or diploma vastly undercuts a person’s ability to succeed in the economy. All young people must understand the importance of completing this cornerstone of their career development strategy.
From YouthBuild’s experience, key elements have emerged for a successful in-program work site where technical skills can be effectively taught.

**Work as Community Service**—Young people are motivated by opportunities to improve the lives of others and are eager to contribute to their communities. Work sites should be structured around activities such as affordable housing, health care, improving low-income neighborhoods, environmental improvements, recycling, services to children and the elderly and other work that provides tangible benefits to the community. Many YouthBuild programs design work sites as community service under the Corporation for National and Community Service’s AmeriCorps program, which enables students to gain education awards while in the program.

**Expert Instruction**—Technical skills training on authentic work sites must be supervised and delivered by qualified experts who know the standards, expectations, and techniques of industry. To provide safe, proper technical training, the youth program must engage with industry experts. This means hiring technical staff such as master trades workers and certified vocational trainers who may have experiences and expectations that are vastly different from the typical youth worker or teacher. Introducing these experts into the organization and creating a multidisciplinary team requires careful staff orientation, supervision, and professional development for each member of the team. With technical experts as part of the team, the youth program can provide training that leads to industry-recognized credentials for students.

**Industry Partners**—It is essential that, prior to starting technical skills training or in-program work projects, the youth organization establish strong partnerships with relevant industry partners to ensure that the training meets the standards necessary for young people to connect to potential employers. These connections can provide training material, tools, job shadows, internships, workplace mentors, and jobs to young people. Trade unions, for example, are important partners for many YouthBuild programs.

**Work Site Management**—Youth organizations need to develop the capacity and expertise to properly manage work sites to minimize liability, sustain productivity, provide an effective training environment, and meet industry
expectations. Developing such expertise might require the organization to hire new staff, establish new systems for monitoring and evaluation, and add new specialized facilities. Proper management of the work site will create an authentic experience for young people that prepares them well for their transition from the program into careers.

**Compensation**—Young people deserve to be paid for work they perform in the program. Modest pay for in-program work can provide students with much needed financial support along with opportunities to learn about money management, taxes, savings, and the rewards of work.

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**Plan for Post-Program Graduate Supports**

After a youth organization has invested so much into its students during the program, it is important that supports be available as graduates establish themselves outside the program. For many graduates, this transition can be so daunting that they risk returning to some of the destructive behaviors with which they entered the training program. The staff should be alert to warning signs such as absences from jobs or college classes; conflicts with employers, teachers, or mentors; and recurring health problems, depression, and discouragement. Successful young people often emerge as a source of support to friends and family members in times of crisis or financial need. The young person’s willingness to respond, whether through generosity or duty, can undermine his or her own progress. These situations deserve special attention from program staff.

There is an array of supports that can be made available to graduates. For example, trusted mentors
that build strong relationships with graduates are invaluable. Likewise, peer support through alumni clubs, peer counseling groups, college clubs, and other graduate organizations are essential in helping young people problem solve, strategize, commiserate, and recharge together. Peer support helps graduates to feel the familiarity, camaraderie, safety, and emotional closeness that they may have felt while in the youth program and can go a long way in protecting their mental health during an extremely challenging period in their lives. Case managers, counselors, career advisors, teachers, trainers, and other program staff who have strong bonds with graduates can be important supports, but, unfortunately, they may be busy with their current students. Still, whatever connections they are able to maintain with graduates will be time well spent.

Support services from partner organizations should be identified for graduates. College advising, mental health counseling, social services, child care providers, and other community-based services can be accessed through the partnerships that the program negotiates as part of its career development strategy.

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**Career Pathways**

**TIP**

**Offer Your Program Services to Employers**

Employers increasingly are investing professional development dollars in staff positions above the entry level. As a result, many employers struggle to maintain productive entry-level workers and are faced with the same problems that youth programs are specifically designed to address. Youth organizations can offer employers “work-ready” job applicants along with ongoing support services to ensure that their entry-level workers get the support they need to be successful. In negotiating with employers, it is useful to know their recruitment costs because youth programs can often deliver training and support services to young workers for less than an employer’s recruitment costs. Such an arrangement could translate into revenue for the program or other supports such as workplace mentors.
Conclusion

Career development for young people who are at risk of being unemployed or underemployed in their prime working years is critically important to the well-being of our economy and society. With workers aging out of the workforce in historic numbers, developing the economic potential of young people is a generational obligation that, if left unfulfilled, will dangerously undercut society’s ability to care for its citizens in the twenty-first century. We simply cannot afford to have one of our most vital resources—capable, committed, hard-working young people—absent from the economic, social, civic, or political processes of our communities.

As a society, we depend on the productivity, creativity, and generosity of our young people, so the responsibility of getting low-skilled youth onto career pathways falls to many organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. It is not the responsibility of youth organizations and schools alone, and it is not the work of charity. It must be a collective effort that is systematic and strategic. Schools and youth organizations, as advocates for young people, are responsible for building the bridge to opportunity for their graduates by forging partnerships, raising public awareness, informing policy, and managing the processes of preparing young people for work and community life. The private sector also is responsible for building the bridge toward young people by working with youth organizations and public institutions to establish policies, funding mechanisms, training programs, and work opportunities for young people. Public sector institutions must work to sustain a policy atmosphere that supports economic development, workforce development, and education and training for low-income, low-skilled youth.

Fortunately, in today’s economy, low-income youth have career opportunities that can lead to long-term economic security and sustainability in meaningful fields of work that do allow them to contribute to their neighborhoods and communities in meaningful ways. But to gain access to these opportunities, and to realize their potential, young people need to gain essential basic knowledge and skills, accompanying credentials, experience, and guidance that adequately prepare them for the demands of the workplace. And, most important, young people need sustained support and encouragement from the adults around them as they seek out their unique place in the economy and society.
Appendix

Resources
Program Checklist: Six A’s of Career Development

The Six A’s are strands of career development activity than run concurrently through the program. The following checklist can be used as a reminder of the types of activities that should be in place to ensure that each of the Six A’s is present in the program.

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<th>Program Checklist Six A’s of Career Development</th>
<th>In Use</th>
<th>Planned</th>
<th>Absent</th>
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<td>1. Assessment of Skills, Interests, Abilities, Values, Experience</td>
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<td>Drug Testing</td>
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<td>Medical/Health Screening</td>
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<td>Academic Needs Assessment</td>
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<td>Career Interest Survey</td>
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<td>Skills Inventory</td>
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<td>Criminal Justice History Documented</td>
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<td>Work History Documented</td>
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<td>Driving Record</td>
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<td>Life Map</td>
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<td>Counseling and Case Management Meetings</td>
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<td>Monthly Progress Reports/Self Assessments</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>2. Alignment of Youth with Opportunities</td>
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<td>Analysis of Regional Economic/Employment Data</td>
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<td>Employer Involvement in Curriculum Design</td>
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<td>Career Exploration Activities</td>
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<td>Career Counseling</td>
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<td>Job Shadows</td>
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<td>Jobs Fair/Career Days</td>
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<td>Industry Tours</td>
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<td>College Campus Tours</td>
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<td>Career Research</td>
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<td>Graduate Speakers</td>
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<td>Individual Career Plans</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>3. Asset Building to Support Careers</td>
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<td>Academic Instruction for GED or Diploma</td>
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<td>Driver’s Education</td>
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<td>Soft Skills Training</td>
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<td>National Work Readiness Certification (NWRC)</td>
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<td>Career Readiness Certificate</td>
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<td>Employment Readiness Scale Assessment</td>
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<td>WorkKeys</td>
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<td>OSHA Certification</td>
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<td>Program Checklist</td>
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<td>First Aid Certification</td>
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<td>CERT Certification</td>
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<td>Technical/Trade/Craft Certification</td>
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<td>Other Certifications</td>
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<td>Job- or Industry-Specific Training</td>
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<td>Computer Training</td>
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<td>AmeriCorps Education Award</td>
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<td>Private Scholarships</td>
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<td>Counseling and Support Services</td>
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<td>Communication/Conflict/Anger Management Training</td>
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<td>Marriage/Relationship/Parenting Training</td>
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<td>Medical/Dental/Vision Care</td>
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<td>Substance Abuse Counseling</td>
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<td>Entrepreneurship Training and Loans</td>
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<td>Financial Literacy Training</td>
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<td>College Prep Classes</td>
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<td>College Credit Courses</td>
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<td>Simulations to Build Familiarity with Work</td>
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<td>Resume Writing and Interview Coaching</td>
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<td>Workplace Etiquette Training</td>
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<td>Transportation/Car Loans/Donated Car Programs</td>
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<td>E-mail Accounts for Graduates</td>
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<td>Professional Wardrobe/Tools for Graduates</td>
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<td>Contacts/Vouchers for Child Care</td>
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<td>Leadership Development Training and Practice</td>
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4. **Access** to Education and Employment Institutions and Systems

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<td>Program Participation in Workforce Investment Board</td>
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<td>Articulation Agreements with Community Colleges</td>
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<td>Articulation Agreements with other Postsecondary Schools</td>
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<td>Partnership with Trade Union Apprenticeship Programs</td>
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<td>Partnership in Regional Sector Employer Associations</td>
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<td>Partnership with High-Growth Industry Employers</td>
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<td>Job Postings</td>
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5. **Attachment** to Work, Career Partners, Career Ladders, College, Support Services, Mentors, Advocates

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<tr>
<th>Attachment to Work, Career Partners, Career Ladders, College, Support Services, Mentors, Advocates</th>
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<td>Job Developer/Career Counselor On Staff</td>
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<td>Placement Services</td>
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<td>Early exposure to work life</td>
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<td>Internships</td>
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<td>Mentors</td>
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<td>Contact with College Advisor</td>
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### Program Checklist: Six A’s of Career Development

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<th>Program Checklist</th>
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<td>Contact with Union Representative</td>
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<td>Contact with Employers</td>
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<td><strong>6. Advocacy and Advising</strong></td>
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<td>Long-term Counseling and Support</td>
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<td>Workplace Mentors</td>
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<td>Ongoing Communication with Employers</td>
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<td>Ongoing Communication with Community College Staff</td>
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<td>Ongoing Communication with Training Organizations</td>
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<td>Regular Follow-Up Meetings with Graduates</td>
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<td>Workplace Visits by YouthBuild Staff</td>
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<td>Graduate Services and Programming</td>
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<td>Peer Support Programs</td>
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<td>Alumni Club</td>
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Sample Career Development Curricula

Amer-I-Can Program Inc., www.amer-i-can.org

Beginning to Work It Out, SBP Consulting, www.workinitout.com

Build a Home, Build a Career, Home Builders Institute, www.hbi.org

Career Orientation Curriculum, Texas Workforce Commission, www.cdr.state.tx.us

Core Curriculum, National Center for Construction Education and Research, www.nccer.org

Job Seeking Skills for People with Disabilities, California State University, Northridge, www.csun.edu

KeyTrain for WorkKeys, Thinking Media, 423-266-2244/877-842-6205

My Decisions, BHB Services, www.mydecisions.org

Passport to Employment, Wisconsin Careers, University of Wisconsin, www.wiscareers.wisc.edu


Professional Development Program, SkillsUSA-VICA, www.skillsusa.org


Strategies for Living, Vital Issues Projects Inc., www.vitalissuesprojects.com


Tackling the Tough Skills, Extension Publications, www.outreach.missouri.edu

Tools for Success, National Center for Construction Education and Research, www.nccer.org

Workplace Essential Skills, PBS LiteracyLink, www.pbs.org/literacy


The above list is a sampling of relevant material for career development activities related to low-income, low-skilled youth, not an endorsement of any particular material by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development or YouthBuild USA.
Sample Resources for Career Exploration and Assessment

Ability Profiler, www.onetcenter.org
The Career Key, www.careerkey.org
Career Perfect, www.careerperfect.com
Career Assessment Inventory, www.pearsonassessments.com
IDEAS, www.pearsonassessments.com
CareerInfoNet, www.careerinfonet.org
ISEEK, www.iseek.org
Blue Collar and Proud of It, bluecollarandproudofit.com
My Plan, www.myplan.com
National Work Readiness Credential, www.workreadiness.com
Employment Readiness Scale, www.employmentreadiness.com

The above list is a sampling of relevant material for career development activities related to low-income, low-skilled youth, not an endorsement of any particular material by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development or YouthBuild USA.
Sample Web Sites for Additional Information

Career Voyages, www.careervoyages.gov

Careeronestop, www.careeronestop.org

Department of Labor, www.dol.gov

Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, www.doleta.gov


Public/Private Ventures, www.ppv.org

Workforce3One, www.workforce3one.org

Midlands Education and Business Alliance, Employer Handbook Extended Learning Opportunities, www.mebasc.com

YouthBuild USA, www.youthbuild.org

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References


