



**Young Adults' Insights on Recruiting for
Career Programs**

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Overview

Partner4Work and its partners are committed to ensuring that every young adult with barriers to employment has the opportunity and resources they need to thrive.

By funding more than a dozen programs throughout the City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, Partner4Work helps young adults prepare for in-demand fields – through activities such as career exploration, credentialing, work experience and academic remediation. Yet, convincing young adults to participate in workforce programs can be challenging, even for programs with high participation rates, like the ones Partner4Work funds.

This report explores this recruitment issue by drawing insights directly from participants in Partner4Work's young adult programs. By understanding their experiences, organizations that provide workforce development services can implement strategies to bring their career services to even more young people.

Sparking Interest

There are several ways young adults learn about workforce development programs. While some youth take it upon themselves to seek out services, it is more common for them to learn about a program from a staff member or a participant. No matter who initiates the process, youth typically consider the benefits they perceive (i.e., How will the program help me? Is it worth of my time?), without exploring other benefits.

For many youth, the first interaction with workforce programs is through direct mail or phone calls. Youth recruited this way related the challenge of identifying a good opportunity.

“My sister and I received letters about the program in the mail and I was unsure about it, because some programs...say good things and they mean well in writing, but then you do them and you're like, ‘I don't know.’”

Youth are more likely to respond to direct mail and phone calls if they clearly communicate the benefits of the programs. One participant described receiving letters about paid internships, which prompted them to explore a program with their mother. Another explained how outreach materials that engage parents can help:

“We get a whole lot of letters, a lot of times with upcoming programs, so that our parents understand it and so they don't have to be at home worrying...‘Okay, where is my kid getting this money from? What is he doing on these days of the week?’”

Some youth cautioned that programs can be too aggressive in their outreach, repeatedly calling their homes or sending too many emails or texts. One participant explained the reaction of their peers:

“People say [the program staff] were annoying. They called them too much or bugged them too much and like telling them to come in. So, people ended up just [asking] them to stop calling, stop texting. It was just too much.”

Direct outreach plays an important role in recruiting efforts, because few participants reported taking the initiative to find workforce services on their own. Those who do take the initiative either turn to quick Internet searches or reach out to familiar places.

“I actually researched it myself. I didn’t want to just do nothing after high school. I still wanted to go to college and try to do something with my life. I just researched GED centers and this place popped up.”

Another participant explained how they took the initiative to return to a program: “I actually was here like 2 years ago, 3 years ago, and I had to stop coming, because my step brother, something happened to him. So, I ended up coming back and trying to finish...this time.”

Relationships Matter

Many young adults learn about workforce development programs through a friend. The young adults who enroll in the programs often engage in peer recruiting. For some, this is a natural response to recognizing a program’s benefits and wanting to share it with their friends. For example, one youth told close friends in need of summer jobs about a paid internship program. Another student was so impressed with a program that they wanted to be an ambassador for it:

“I was just thinking of spreading the word. ... So, people can see like ‘Oh, yeah, they could do that for me, too.’ ... Like, there’s a lot of homeless kids and the program can help them find a shelter to go to, get a job and a paycheck.”

Some agencies recognize the recruitment power of youth who are willing to spread the word about their programs among peers. Some even incentivize the referrals. As one student noted:

“When I got involved, I started getting...my friends involved as well. [The program was] not getting the attention of a lot of kids; they asked us to recruit others. They had this little thing, where like the more kids you recruit into the program, you would get a little gift card or something like that.”

The young adults who recruit peers offer insights into why some decline to take advantage of the programs. Some attribute the lack of interest to insufficient information.

“I think the biggest problem is...helping them understand the true meaning of the program, instead of just bombarding them with information. You know, like instead of just asking them to be in a program, explain it to them.”

Others think their peers may lack motivation, fail to understand a program’s benefits or have other priorities.

“I feel like we broadcast it enough. ... They are like ‘I can’t do this and work my job,’ but they don’t know that we can work it into the schedule. So, maybe it is like them not being fully aware of how it works, but also them being lazy and not wanting to take the opportunity. ... That is probably the biggest factor.”

Peer recruitment seems to be especially effective when potential participants have the opportunity to meet program staff. One participant learned about a program from a friend who completed it.

Afterwards, the friend talked to the staff about her interest. “So, I went ahead and got in touch with [the program staff] and I got into the program,” she said. A newcomer to the area connected with a program through one of the participants he knew:

“They pretty much invited me here and told me about it. ... I came in, it was cool, the staff here were welcoming. They explained the program to me. I didn’t see anything bad about it, so I signed up for it.”

Youth also trust program recommendations from adults, whether a coach or a counselor, who know them well, understand their options and advocate for them. As one young adult explained:

“I dropped out of high school when I was 16, but my brother was still in school, and he was going through a lot of stuff, and our counselor brought it to our attention about [the program] and she said that I could go there.”

Another participant learned about a program through their half-way house caseworker: “She told me about the program. ... [I] liked it as soon as I came here.”

Some youth find opportunities through connections that exist among agencies that run youth workforce programs or continuity of services available from service providers. One student transferred into a program, because they had participated in another one run by the provider:

“I was in 9th grade and that is when I got into a summer job program; I had a job that summer and I came back the next year. I was getting older and I was in 10th grade and found [this program] offered internships [during the school year].”

Another participant who missed an opportunity explained that a case manager connected them with another opportunity:

“I was in one program they recommended. ... But I missed the start, I never even actually went there, I just did testing. ... So, my [case manager] said, ‘Well I know another program where you can get your diploma.’ So, pretty much, it was just like the greatest thing that happened, because GED is harder than getting your diploma.”

A few youths reported benefiting from their long-term involvement with a social services organization. Often, they do not think of the organization as a provider of academic or workforce development opportunities. Rather, they see it as a safe, stable space and an integral part of their daily life, sometimes for years. One young adult, who had received services from an organization since age 5, explained their involvement:

“I was coming here for the program and I was going to school. It was just something to keep me out of the streets ‘cause I knew...if I [didn’t] show up I was going to go do something foolish.”

Program providers that can create lasting relationships and levels of services can be in a better position to recruit for their workforce development programs.

Engaging Youth in Schools

Programs that collaborate with schools and target in-school youth have the advantage of a common space in which they can interact with prospective participants.

“Last year when I was in 11th grade [a program staffer] talked to us, so I took an application...I really needed to be in the program.”

Youth note the convenience of meeting program staff in school – they do not have to go out of their way to learn about a trustworthy program. They can also have more productive conversations with the program staff as they can drop-in throughout the school day. One student noted the convenience of visiting information tables one program set up in school:

“I was really interested and liked the different opportunities. Because...I am going into art, there are not many internships or anything that allows us to be ready in our careers.”

Recruitment Takes Many Forms

The young adults who shared their insights offer compelling evidence that effective recruitment goes beyond advertising opportunities. They attest to the importance of workforce programs having strong allies in schools, including guidance counselors, coaches and case workers. They also confirm that parental involvement and peer recruitment play important roles in their decision-making process. More importantly, the youth explain that it is necessary for workforce development programs to clearly communicate how they can help with academic and career needs.

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