IMPROVING PROGRAM DESIGN

Through Effective Youth Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Many TechHire grantees offer training and employment services to youth and young adults ages 17 to 29. Many within this group may be out of work or not in school, have limited work experience, have little to no post-secondary schooling, have been justice-involved, or have received social services.

Today, almost 5 million "transition age" young people are disconnected from the workforce or school.[1] This is, in part, why the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) mandates a comprehensive suite of services for youth and young adult workers. It includes 14 elements—including on-the-job training, dropout recovery, leadership development, and financial literacy—representing a suite of youth-connecting activities that can help prepare young people for a successful transition to adulthood.[2]

The recruitment and retention of young people in TechHire's programs can be difficult, whether it is finding ready and interested candidates or maintaining their engagement through program completion and job acquisition. This FAQ shares positive youth development (PYD) approaches to support TechHire grantees as they recruit, retain, and help place young participants in in-demand careers. In addition, it highlights strategies to enhance program design through the meaningful engagement of participants and alumni, as well as promising techniques TechHire programs are using to connect with participants.

What is positive youth development, and why is it relevant to my TechHire program?

Positive youth development (PYD) is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages young people in a manner that is "productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths."[3]

There is a growing body of literature and research on PYD and the role protective, or resiliency, factors have on a young person's engagement and outcomes.[4] They encourage the development of interventions such as monitoring, connecting to caring adults, engaging in positive peer cohorts, and involving young people as equal partners.

PYD strategies, and the principles that underlie them, can help TechHire grantees increase recruitment and retention practices by:

- ✓ Fostering stronger connections between staff and participants
- ✓ Building participant leadership skills that translate into the workplace successes
- ✓ Encouraging participants to build social capital networks within cohorts
- ✓ Increasing word-of-mouth promotion of the benefits of enrolling in the TechHire program
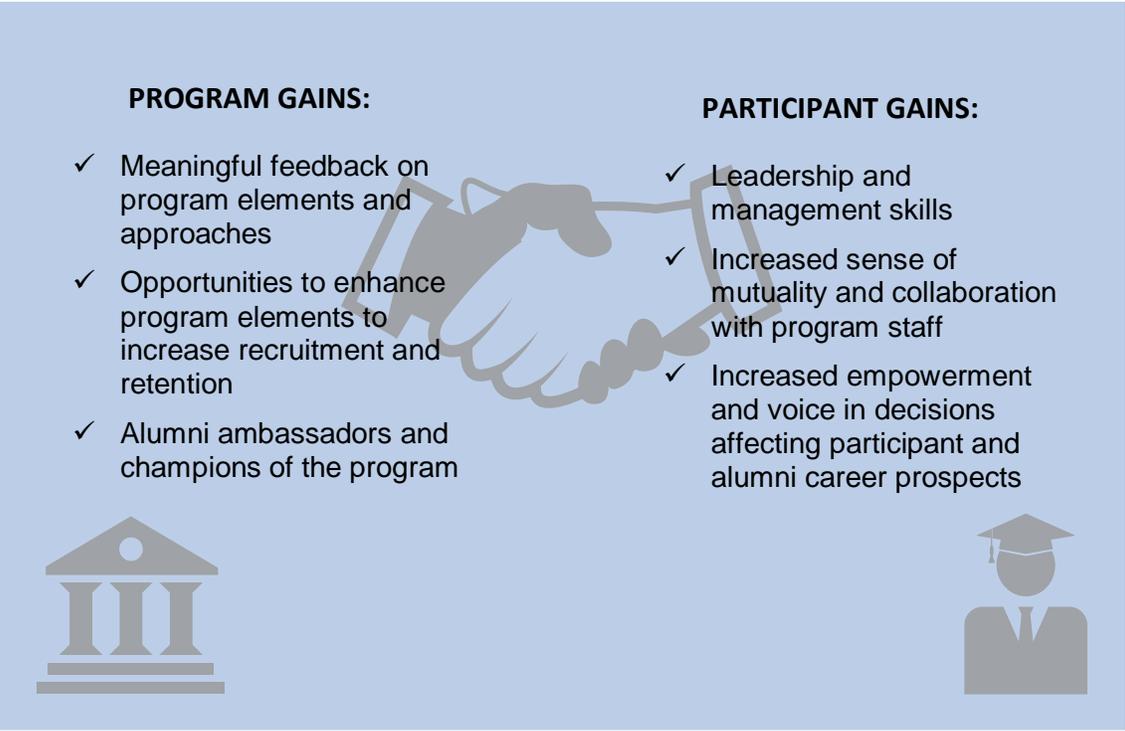
How can I incorporate PYD principles into TechHire recruitment and retention practices?

PYD strategies to consider include:

- Checking your marketing materials to ensure they are accessible, easy to use, and welcoming to your youth and young adult audience. Do they use strength-based language? Are they accessible at the appropriate reading level?

- Personalizing your outreach whenever possible, using motivational interviewing and rapport-building techniques early to build trust, engage, and more quickly surface needs and interests, while also identifying strengths and internal and external resources.

- Using cohorts within training to promote peer-to-peer exchange to help participants build networks during and after program completion.

- Offering peer-led and leadership opportunities to build management and employability skills

- Co-creating career or case management plans with participants, explicitly focusing on their stated goals and interests to drive plan implementation.

How can I improve program design by increasing participant engagement?

TechHire programs are uniquely positioned to help program participants not only build in-demand "hard" skills, but also the leadership, employability, and other "soft" skills they need to succeed in the workforce. Engaging participants—beyond just training—in the implementation and enhancement of your program designs offers benefits to both you and your participants.

PROGRAM GAINS:

✓ Meaningful feedback on program elements and approaches

✓ Opportunities to enhance program elements to increase recruitment and retention

✓ Alumni ambassadors and champions of the program

PARTICIPANT GAINS:

✓ Leadership and management skills

✓ Increased sense of mutuality and collaboration with program staff

✓ Increased empowerment and voice in decisions affecting participant and alumni career prospects

## So, what are some effective ways to enhance participant engagement?

Develop a systematic approach to gather and incorporate feedback. This is not just about training or instruction, but also about recruitment, case management strategies, and connections to support services. Many programs have a follow-up period after training to help graduates navigate new jobs and collect data on job attachment and retention. Consider designing and implementing feedback loops from participants and alumni at various touch points of program interaction. Doing so can offer helpful and real-time feedback on ways to improve program designs:

- *Intake/assessment*: Ask questions during intake on how candidates learned about your program, including what methods were most effective (or not) in connecting them to you.

- *Midpoint pulse check*: Consider surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one interviews to gather insights about training, level of support, and case management approaches.

- *Follow-up*: Consider a post-graduation survey or interview, perhaps the last week of training, or shortly thereafter, to invite graduates' reflections on the most helpful and effective program elements and supports.

- *Incorporate*: Use existing strategic planning meetings or retreats to take stock of participant and alumni feedback, and develop plans to incorporate changes into your business processes or program designs. Consider how these changes may affect onboarding or ongoing training of staff to gain buy-in and implement desired changes.

Increasing Youth Participation to Build Skills and Improve Programs

In his 1992 UNICEF essay on child participation, child development expert Roger Hart wrote of the importance of moving beyond tokenism to meaningful child and youth participation and citizenship. His "ladder of participation" is instructive as TechHire programs consider systemtic, structural, and programmatic elements that may support shifts toward participatory engagement of youth and young adult participants.
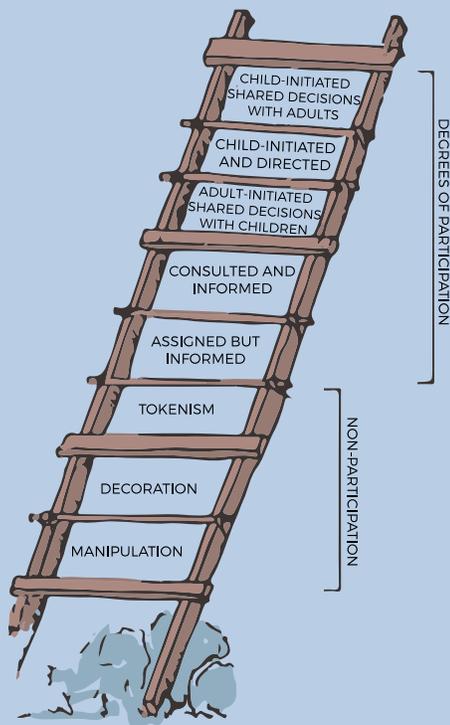
Source: UNICEF International Child Development Centre, retrieved from http://cergnyc.org/files/2011/09/Childrens_participation-Tokenism-booklet.pdf

Establish advisory panels. Engage young people in meaningful and ongoing dialogue by hosting focus groups or empowering a youth and young adult advisory group to advise the program on effective youth outreach, retention, and case management techniques. For example, share training agendas for onboarding participant-facing staff to solicit ideas that will enhance training and encourage participant-staff rapport building. Share designs and plans for case management or business process flow changes to gather participant and alumni suggestions to ensure new strategies are informed by young people and participant-centered.

Build and support alumni networks. Continue engagement with training cohorts after they graduate by supporting alumni networking opportunities, job fairs, and other continuing education training events. Encourage participants to remain in contact with one another, using social media or online tools used during the program. These platforms will allow you to share resources with alumni and facilitate their ongoing communication while building networks of peers as they move up in their careers. Doing so not only helps build their external resources, but also increases your access to alumni and their capacity to share information about your program to new cohorts or candidates.

What are some other promising youth and young adult recruitment practices?

TechHire programs are using a range of innovative approaches to connect with potential program participants. Following are several, as well as other tips to enhance your recruitment practices:

- Participate in local social service or workforce consortia to market your TechHire program and identify candidates from partner systems.

- Coordinate with social service programs that promote work—such as TANF, SNAP, child support, and even Medicaid—to identify potential candidates.

- Analyze your recruitment data to identify trends in referrals by community, age, referral source, or other common characteristics, which may help you refine and target recruitment efforts.

- Offer encouragement and support to service program partners for recruiting candidates and helping with job placement.

- Co-locate recruitment staff at organizations that can offer steady referral pipelines—from career centers and community colleges to community-based providers and high schools.

- Use loss-aversion techniques in marketing and other materials to increase buzz about your program (e.g., "Don't lose out on…" or "Only a few days left to…").

What are some other promising youth and young adult retention practices?

TechHire programs are using a range of innovative approaches to retain program participants. Following are several, as well as other tips to enhance your retention practices:

- Use platforms like Google Hangouts, Slack, and text messaging services to help staff stay in contact with participants and enable participants to keep in touch with one another. Introduce the platform(s) at the beginning of training, and encourage use throughout and even after graduation. Use texting, for example, to push out reminders or assignments, or use Google Hangouts to encourage study groups and peer-to-peer exchanges in and out of the classroom.

- For the purposes of tracking employment, consider the use of incentive funds to encourage participants to keep in touch after training. Invite successful participants to come back and speak to your new TechHire participants.

- Affirm commitments to the program and gather contact information often. Consider having participants sign a commitment or pledge at the beginning of training as well as at the end of the program to keep in touch during your follow-up period. At case management check-ins, include time to update contact information and the best ways to reach participants, and make sure to re-collect this information right before graduation.

TECHHIRE PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT:

Like many TechHire grantees, Mount Wachusett Community College (the Mount) is serving youth and young adult participants in in-demand advanced manufacturing occupations. The Mount is in a rural part of Massachusetts and offers noncredit training at one of the college's satellite campuses.

The Mount's approach to recruitment is simple: Be creative and think outside the box. Briana Peña, a career development coach who oversees recruitment efforts for the Mount's TechHire grant, says being in a rural community requires that approach. To connect with potential program candidates, Peña and her team are partnering with career centers and local high school guidance counselors, using texting and online platforms, and have begun to co-locate at the Mount's main campus two days a week.

"We are most proud of our innovative online recruitment efforts," shares Peña. The Mount has been using Indeed.com to share its training opportunities, which has shown a strong return on investment, with a low cost to post advertisements and a high number of steady referrals.

The Mount is also focused on "building bridges to help students complete and find jobs," Peña says. She takes extra care to stay in touch with students after they begin training and during the follow-up period. She checks in regularly with each student to gather feedback and help troubleshoot needs. To stay in contact with participants, Peña and her team use Google Voice, which allows them to send free text messages to students to share reminders and other information. It is often the best and most efficient way to stay in touch with the Mount's youth and young adult program participants, she notes.

In reflecting on what has worked best in the Mount's engagement with youth and young adult participants, Peña offers this advice:

- ✓ Be creative in your outreach and engagement efforts, and make sure leadership is supportive.
- ✓ Meet young people "where they are," using the technology they use to stay in touch.
- ✓ Listen actively—many candidates may not know what they want or how to best apply their strengths. Listen to what they need, offer support, and show options.
- ✓ Be aware of community resources to connect participants to needed supports that you can't offer in-house.
- ✓ Gather feedback through post-graduation surveys or one-on-one conversations about your program and approach.

Where can I find additional resources on engaging young people in employment and training programs?

- **WIOA Youth Program Resources Page**: The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act outlines a broad youth vision that supports an integrated service delivery system and provides a framework through which states and local areas can leverage other federal, state, local, and philanthropic resources to support in-school and out-of-school youth. The US Department of Labor (DOL) has developed a series of technical assistance resources to help state and local workforce leaders, youth program practitioners, and other stakeholders and partners better understand and successfully implement the WIOA youth program. See https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2017/03/22/09/55/WIOA-Youth-Program-Resources-Page

- **WIOA Youth Overview**: https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2018/08/07/13/03/WIOAYouthOverview

- "Serving Out-of-School Youth Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act": This paper shares promising youth recruitment and engagement practices that are research- and evidence-informed.

- "Toolkit for Effective Front-line Services to Youth": This 2007 DOL publication offers in-depth tools, resources, and strategies for working with and on behalf of young people in workforce programs. It includes recommendations from intake to follow-up, as well documentation and employer engagement.

- "Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making": This publication provides six guiding principles for developing and supporting youth advisory councils.

- "Youth Engagement in Development: Effective Approaches and Action-Oriented Recommendations for the Field": This 2014 publication from the US Agency for International Development provides tips on meaningfully engaging young people in program development and design, based on Roger Hart's "'ladder of participation" (see "Increasing Youth Participation to Build Skills and Improve Programs," on page 3 above).

- "Six Tips for Increasing Meaningful Youth Engagement in Programs": This related summary report offers key tips for implementing a meaningful youth engagement effort.

ENDNOTES

[1] Measure of America of the Social Science Research Council, Disconnected Youth, 2018, http://www.measureofamerica.org/disconnected-youth/

[2] US Department of Labor, Training and Employment Guidance Letter WIOA No. 21-16, March 2, 2017, https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEGL/TEGL_21-16.pdf;

US Department of Labor, Training and Employment Guidance Letter WIOA No. 23-14, March 26, 2015, https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEGL/TEGL_23-14.pdf

[3] Youth.gov, "Positive Youth Development," https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development

[4] Youth.gov, "Positive Youth Development"; Jack P. Shonkoff and Samuel J. Meisels, *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=otfLCgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA115&dq=protective+resilience+factors+research&ots=QhqHs7rlAc&sig=sxZBTWNlHNFbM--JQOcf5erwing#v=onepage&q=protective%20resilience%20factors%20research&f=false