

## Youth CareerConnect Strategies for Recruitment and Community Outreach

In today's economy students need a well-rounded education, soft skills, mentoring, and internships that will prepare them for postsecondary education and entering the workforce. Based on research and experience, it is clear far too many students lack motivation in school, connections to potential mentors, and the know how to seek opportunities in their communities.

Community outreach and recruitment are of primary importance to solving these barriers. Your Youth CareerConnect (YCC) program and its participants benefit from partnerships, collaborations and support with a wide range of entities including the general public.

What follows are tips and strategies to assist you in these efforts.

### Design an Outreach Plan

Outreach is the key to your growth and success and should be considered a high-priority and an on-going task. It includes everything from enrolling participants and attracting business partners to sharing your stories and enlisting assistance from the community at large. By having an outreach plan in place you are assured of continued forward motion. Start with the following:

- Set measurable goals for your student enrollment and business participation.
- Research businesses, organizations, community influencers, and media in your community that you would like to target.
- Determine your best strategies for reaching out to these potential partners.
- Set timelines and create an outreach action-item calendar.

### Cultivate Relationships

The heart of recruitment and community outreach understands the significance of relationships. There is nothing more powerful. An emotional connection is often what motivates people to action. They may help you spread the word, recruit for you, or volunteer in some other way simply because you asked for their assistance.

Utilize your entire sphere of influence. Reach beyond the people you work with, who are already familiar with YCC. Seek out other community members who may be able to connect you to companies

interested in mentorships, internships, and employees who might volunteer with your initiative. You do not necessarily have to be directly connected for people to be willing to help. The introduction of a mutual acquaintance or colleague is often enough to open the door and lead to some amazing results – perhaps a lasting bond or just some vital assistance at exactly the right moment.

## **Tailor Your Message and Spread the Word**

### **Build Your Story**

Gather all the positive information you have about your program that will be relevant to various stakeholders and to the public. You want to tout your program's potential, its effectiveness, and its benefits to everyone involved. Prepare to tell your story and offer updates about your successes. This weaves your program into the fabric of your community and gives businesses and the public a sense of ownership encouraging them to support it even after the grant is completed. The wider a net you cast in your community, the more potential your grant has of being successful.

### **... to Reach Businesses**

Companies are looking for a ready-to-work workforce. For example, in the greater Chattanooga area, there are currently more than 15,000 job openings that pay \$35,000 and above with benefits (Chattanooga 2.0, 2015). These jobs cannot be filled due to lack of education and/or soft-skills training. This is not just a Chattanooga problem; companies across the nation are struggling to find qualified candidates to fill positions. Showing companies how YCC prepares young people to enter the workforce with knowledge and skills will go a long way in convincing them to partner with you. One grantee used the slogan, "Better students, Better workers, Better community!" Come up with your winning slogan for business partners.

### **... to Reach Civic Groups and the General Public**

Civic organizations and houses of worship are often looking for a good cause to support with volunteers. Civic groups may even be able to offer financial assistance. Network with their leaders to mine these resources and ask to speak to their members.

When doing so:

- Show how YCC is a win for the community, how it provides a mechanism to better prepare recent high-school grads for work or college, and how this is vital for economic development in your community.
- Share statistics illustrating how YCC impacts them as tax payers and residents.

- Relate your success stories. Consider using one or two of your program participants to share their experiences. Not only can they share a powerful testimonial, they can build self-confidence and add to their real-world capabilities through this public speaking experience.
- Give your audience a call to action. Tell them what you need them to do – whether it is spreading the word throughout the community, offering a connection within their business or place of employment, or volunteering in some way.

Remember, it is best not wait until you are asked to speak to start preparing your talk. Create your presentation in advance.

### ... to Reach Potential Students

Address school assemblies. Instead of an administrator or teacher making an announcement about recruitment in class rooms, use assemblies to recruit new students to your program. Use current and former participants as ambassadors. Advance their presentation skills by asking them to fashion unique and creative ways to share their experiences with their peers and encourage others to participate. This includes in-person presentations as well as virtual ways to spread the word such as videos.

Presentations from current participants at school assemblies that highlight the unique and experiential aspects of your program can be more engaging than an in-class announcement. Get creative and ask program participants to write and perform a song, rap, skit, or play as a way to share their experiences and encourage others to participate in your YCC program. Social media platforms can also help with recruiting, particularly when posts are geared towards potential students. Additional social media tips are provided below.

### ... to Reach News Media

- Get press coverage with timely stories. Your local press will welcome community-oriented human-interest stories. Education and preparing young people for the future is a hot topic. Create a professional-sounding, well-written release using the same statistics and success stories you would share in a presentation to the public. To keep it timely, focusing your release on an upcoming or recent event or activity.
- Request a meeting with the editorial board of your local paper. Bring statistics concerning the number of young people who drop out, those who graduate and do nothing, and those who graduate and do something. Share with them the difference in salary for a high school graduate, one who goes on to learn a skill such as welding, and one who goes to college. Offer information about how YCC is making a difference. Share ways in which community members can get involved with the initiative.

# Make the Most of Modern Messaging

## Electronic Newsletters

Consistent communication is the best way to motivate current and potential partners and inform community members. Build a mailing list and demonstrate your impact with regular updates. There are a number of online tools to choose from including Google email (Gmail), Constant Contact, Emma, MailChimp, and iContact that provide email, newsletter templates and mailing list storage. Monthly fees vary and some may be free at certain usage levels. A once-a-month message is fine and it should be clear, concise and not text-heavy. When possible, include a picture, it can be worth a thousand words and engage more people than just text.

## Social Media

Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube – social media is hugely popular and is the communications method of choice for younger generations. Educate yourself about these platforms and learn which are popular with various age groups. Your YCC participants can be helpful in this area; students can help set up your accounts and keep your pages active and current. Upload video testimonies, photos of program activities, posts about the importance of the YCC program to your students, and quotes from movers and shakers in the community who have interacted with the initiative. In order to use pictures of participants, make sure to have signed photo waivers forms. If the participant is under 18 years old the form will need to be signed by a parent and/or guardian. Consider starting a hashtag for students, teachers, employers and mentors to use when posting about YCC events and activities. If pictures are taken at an open house or event inform guests you are posting the pictures on social media and ask them to tag themselves and share the post; most will be happy to comply.

## Podcasts

Podcasts are another popular “infotainment” medium. Encourage your students to create podcasts about their experience with YCC and what they hope to be doing when they graduate. You can upload these to iTunes for free and share the links on social media, through email and electronic newsletters, and on your school’s website. You can also work with participating employers to do the same. They may even agree to share the link through their companies’ distribution channels. These can help promote both student recruitment and new employer partnerships.

## Ask for Help When You Need It

You may have heard the phrase, “You have not because you ask not.” The message is clear – do not be shy about asking! The worst that can happen is that they say “no.” That does not mean you cannot approach them again at another point when the answer might be “yes.”

### Need Help with Outreach?

Involve your students. Ask them to suggest outreach strategies and develop materials. Not only are you giving them ownership in the program, you are giving them a chance to develop and strengthen their networking and leadership skills. Work like this could also be a good extra credit opportunity.

Consider hiring an intern. College students majoring in marketing, graphic design, leadership development, and other areas need practical experience. Allowing students and interns to assist you in your recruitment and community outreach efforts is a win-win proposition. They are usually highly motivated, interns are often required to work on a specific project for credit, and both are often FREE.

### Need Outreach Materials or Advertising?

Developing printed table tents, posters, or panel cards to place in area coffee shops, stores, recreation centers or to use as leave-behinds at speaking engagements is another strategy. Interestingly, many companies already do billboard or media buys and might be happy to donate periodic ad signage or commercial time. Others have printing capabilities and might contribute this as an in-kind donation to your initiative.

Advertising agencies, in particular, often choose a cause to support as their gift to the community. Some may choose a different program each year while others may adopt a single initiative for the long-term. They might create collateral pieces or public service announcements for television and radio to assist you in your outreach efforts.

### Need an Efficient Way to Recruit Employers?

Enlist the help of your Chamber of Commerce. Local Chambers of Commerce serve the interests of the business community and advocate economic growth and job creation. Your Chamber is a direct pipeline to a wide variety of employers who could benefit from your initiative. Request the opportunity to speak to area Chamber Councils and take a student from the program with you to share his or her story. This is the perfect way to engage a number of potential business partners all at once and in a receptive environment

## Conclusion

Effective outreach and recruiting is a slow, steady process. It only works if you commit to it. Design a plan and be diligent about adhering to it. Build your story and be diligent about communicating it. Remember to tailor your message to each target group. Potential business partners will require a different approach than your student participants or members of the general public. Use every possible resource at your disposal. Be inventive, persistent, and do not hesitate to ask for help. Involve the entire community in your initiative. It will be to your YCC program's benefit, and theirs.

## Appendix A: References

- Chattanooga 2.0 (2015), Building the Smartest Community in the South. Chattanooga, TN. Retrieved from <http://chatt2.org/>