YARG Town Hall: Impact of COVID-19 on Youth Well Being

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW
In our October town hall, youth apprentices from three Youth Apprenticeship Readiness Grants (YARG) programs – Alaska Works (Jake), Easter Seals (Jeremiah, Maolo ("Mimi") and Artino), and NRAEF (Jaymeerah) – shared insights on their respective programs and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their apprenticeship experience. They responded to questions from the moderator and attendees, enabling program practitioners to learn from their most important stakeholders – youth apprentices themselves. While the panelists comprise a small subset of YARG participants, they form a microcosm of the apprenticeship population. Therefore, their input is valuable intelligence on the efficacy of various program practices and what should be retained or modified.

WHAT YARG COMPONENTS ARE WORKING?

Encouraging feedback. The benefit of participant feedback was a strong overall message. The panelists were appreciative of being heard, and the grantees welcomed their comments. Continuing to engage in such dialogue at the program level will help practitioners assess and improve programming.

Hands-on instruction. Several participants hailed training with a professional as the feature that made apprenticeship most worthwhile since it provided them with direct on-the-job training.

Exposure to multiple career pathways. The panelists found value in being exposed to numerous pathways in their field of interest as this opens doors to additional opportunities. Easter Seals and Alaska Works panelists lauded that they are learning about multiple construction trades (plumbing, electrical, etc.).

Alternative to college. The panelists’ positive accounts of their experiences demonstrate that apprenticeships offer many youths an attractive alternative to college by providing experiential learning within a smaller and more supportive group environment. Plus, by paying wages and eliminating the financial burden of college, these programs place participants on a track to financial freedom.

WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT?

Increased outreach. The panelists advocated for earlier and more frequent exposure to apprenticeships and career paths through field trips to businesses and visits by program representatives to their schools.

Mental health. The need to connect to mental health services was a crucial component of participant support, particularly by one panelist who was able to find a therapist through a program referral.

Accommodating different learning styles. One participant noted that the pandemic slowdown in program work offered the benefit of allowing him to spend more time mastering class concepts. This brought attention to the fact that not all young people learn at the same pace. Making job-related instruction accessible to all learners would make apprenticeships more equitable and inclusive.

HOW CAN WE MAGNIFY OUR SUCCESSES?

Caring practitioners. Some of our panelists entered their apprenticeships at the suggestion of a trusted teacher. All are flourishing under the encouragement of a supportive program instructor or supervisor. This demonstrates how well youth respond when they are in a safe, nurturing workplace peopled with caring mentors.

Youth Ambassadors. Word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool, and our program panelists are already spreading the word about their success in their apprenticeship programs. Since young people are most open to advice they
hear from their peers, making both program components and outreach efforts more “youth friendly” will amplify a program’s exposure and improve recruitment, retention, and completion.

**GENERAL THEMES**

**Theme 1: Apprenticeship Can Change a Participant’s Future**
Panelists were asked to consider how their YARG program has impacted their lives and what their situation might be if the program were not available to them. The consensus was that their futures look brighter because of their YARG participation.

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<tr>
<th>Without Apprenticeship</th>
<th>With Apprenticeship</th>
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<tr>
<td>▪ I’d have fewer employment options.</td>
<td>▪ I’m more confident because of my interactions with program supervisors and co-workers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ I’d be less motivated to explore jobs and career paths.</td>
<td>▪ I learned to act professionally and became more of an adult.</td>
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<td>▪ It would be difficult to gain the experience needed for higher-level jobs.</td>
<td>▪ I acquired new skills in a comfortable learning environment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ I’d have a much more difficult path to finding, and training for, a career.</td>
<td>▪ I built valuable relationships with my peers and mentors.</td>
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<td>▪ I had access to personal support.</td>
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*They actually helped me get set up with a therapist. – Mimi*

**Theme 2: COVID’s Impact on the Apprenticeship Experience**
The impact of COVID-19 varied among the youth panelists. Some did well in a virtual school environment; others struggled. Those students who joined the program later were delayed from starting their schooling, but apprentices who had already started benefitted from smaller class sizes.

*The challenge and opportunity of virtual learning.* Distance learning and the lack of social interaction posed challenges and required adjustments that were not easy for everyone to make. Yet, the online work also enabled students to acquire computer and internet skills and to learn to communicate in a professional digital space.

*The benefit of a slower pace.* All agreed that the pandemic slowed things down. However, while practitioners may have been concerned mainly with the pandemic’s negative consequences – work site closures, fewer activities, little in-person learning – one panelist reported a positive byproduct: the opportunity for deeper learning. With fewer time constraints, students were able to spend more time absorbing class concepts and mastering job skills.

**Theme 3: Improving Apprenticeship Programs**
The advice from our young panelists on how to improve existing programs boiled down to:

(1) **The exposure**—All panelists agreed that starting apprenticeships earlier in their school career would have given them a head start in their chosen career pathway.

(2) **The quality of the experience**—Panelists praised their programs for providing robust learning experiences and training. Additionally, they offered insights on how to make them better for the next group of youth apprentices.

**SUCCESS STORIES**

Throughout the event, each panelist shared their own individual successes: gaining confidence, securing a more direct route to their career path, achieving the certifications they needed, finding a profession that they didn’t know was open to them, forming a helpful network of adult professionals. All panelists made it clear that the YARG program has made a major difference in their lives.

*The apprenticeship program came at a perfect time because I had just graduated school. We weren’t doing any hands-on work in the kitchen like I would get here [in the apprenticeship program]. I was stuck in a place I didn’t want to be, and I had no direction. It came at the perfect time.*

– Jaymeerah
Earlier and broader exposure—Panelists felt strongly that students should be exposed to career paths and apprenticeships as early as possible (i.e., middle school and elementary school) Panelists:

- suggested summer programs (pre-apprenticeships) for making youngsters aware of the apprenticeship option;
- championed field trips as an ideal way to take in the realities of the working world; and
- offered some outreach tips (see Theme 4 section).

Build the experience to build skills – and character. As noted, the panelists favored structured activities that teach practical job skills. They also understood the value of the soft skills they were learning. Interpersonal communication, empathetic interaction, and professional demeanor have an important place in these programs. Some takeaways:

- Work with schools to develop curricula that align with apprenticeship career paths and training.
- Incorporate experiential learning wherever possible to keep participants engaged.
- Design activities to teach both hard and soft skills and to build character.

Manage expectations. Retention and program completion can be increased if the realities of a program are clearly and thoroughly described before apprentices sign on. Our panelists stressed that unanticipated requirements and other surprises have a negative impact on participants’ ability to succeed.

Equity and inclusivity. Making programs welcoming to all races, genders, and learning styles was another reoccurring theme. For instance, one female panelist felt extremely fortunate to be working under a woman chef. Another noted that apprenticeships must accommodate those who learn in a different way or at a different pace. Mental health support and social services should also be top of mind in program design and implementation.

Theme 4: Raising Awareness Among Youth Populations
Most of the panelists learned of their program in pre-21st century ways: from school instructors, family members in the same trade, and in-school program recruiting. They were eager to offer some inventive and on-trend suggestions for spreading the word about apprenticeship in ways that might be more effective with their generation.

Youth-friendly Messaging Ideas

- Use the internet and social media platforms.
- Set up recruiting areas in public spaces – mall kiosks, for instance, “like the Army”!
- Create engaging marketing content that makes apprenticeship look fun.
- Depict young participants on fliers, posters, and websites – “not old people in uniforms.”
- Design posters for a variety of career pathways (e.g., medicine, computer science, the trades, etc.).
- Use youth ambassadors to talk to other students. Young people listen to their peers.
- Demonstrate program inclusivity by enlisting a diverse group of youth ambassadors.
- Start younger: Add elementary and middle schoolers to your outreach efforts.

Expand Traditional Outreach

- Sponsor more field trips to area businesses, work sites, and institutions that sponsor apprenticeships.
- Continue making school presentations to talk about your program.
Apprenticeship programs yield positive results. Making them as effective as possible will enable young people to explore employment options and acquire the professional skills and life-coping strategies they need to reach a happy and productive adulthood. Without such opportunities, many youth will be left to find their own way with no guidance or preparation. One of our youth panelists offered a nature metaphor to describe that possibility:

“[You] can’t judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree. There’s a lot of fish out there trying to climb trees and I think they need a little help.” – Jake

Youth Apprenticeship Readiness Grants (YARG) awards are structured to support the enrollment of youth (16 - 24 years, in-and-out of school) into new or existing Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) and promote the apprentices’ prospects of success in the program by ensuring wraparound services are readily accessible. Learn more about the Youth Apprenticeship Readiness Grants (YARG) grantees here.