Youth Workforce Preparation

Because of its focus on the development of practical life skills, it could be argued that 4-H has always prepared youth for the workforce, at least indirectly. However, to be most effective, we need to intentionally link our work with young people to specific workforce preparation content and outcomes.

The Situation and Opportunity
Preparing youth for the workforce is a major concern. Employers are reporting that young workers lack key skills and attributes necessary for success in today’s workplace.

Companies are asking for young adults who have applied skills in communication, leadership, teamwork, and problem solving. Extension’s Knowledge Economy initiative has identified “Employment Success” as an area of focus because of the changing nature of the 21st century workplace.

OSU Extension plays an important role in addressing this concern. Because of a focus on the development of practical life skills, it could be argued that 4-H has always prepared youth for the workforce, at least indirectly. However, to be most effective, we need to intentionally link our work with young people to workforce preparation, then document and report impacts.

A recent report from Battelle makes the case for 4-H as being important to individual development and creating an engaged and knowledgeable workforce for the 21st century. Thus, the Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Initiative has been created to strengthen and expand programs that are developing job skills in youth.

The workforce preparation components described in this handout are all part of a larger foundation of positive youth development. It should be recognized that in addition to components of workforce preparation programming, an intentional foundation of best practices in positive youth development is critical.

High quality 4-H experiences incorporate the Eight Key Elements of Positive Youth Development. An important example is the presence of adults who engage youth as valued partners. Using the experiential learning model to design learning activities that are active, engaging, and include reflection is also an important part of positive youth development.

Life skill development is an outcome of involvement in the 4-H program, including all the 4-H program delivery methods. Youth are developing applied skills such as communication, teamwork, and decision-making as well as subject matter/technical skills through their 4-H experience.
The Need for Workforce Preparation

The idea of preparing youth for the workforce has taken on a new meaning in the 21st century. The shift to the knowledge economy has brought widespread concern that young people are entering the workforce without the skills employers value the most such as communication, critical thinking, leadership, and teamwork skills (Levy & Murnane, 2006; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003).

Today’s knowledge and technology-based economy, having simplified or eliminated routine tasks, requires highly skilled workers (Levy & Murnane, 2006; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003). As workplaces become more complex, more jobs now require critical thinking and social skills. Employers and business leaders, educators, government task forces, and other key stakeholders have consistently identified a skills gap in graduates of high school and of two-year and four-year colleges. All agree: The nature of work has changed, and addressing the widening skills gap between the skills employers need and the capabilities of new workers is vital to the future.

A lack of skills is only part of the concern. Another aspect is the lack of opportunity (America’s Promise, 2007; Joyce & Neumark, 2001). America’s Promise (2007) data suggest that young people lack opportunities to practice and master skills needed to succeed. Adolescents are expected to acquire skills that will help them in the transition to college, the workforce, and adulthood despite the fact that few opportunities are provided to them to gain the necessary skills.

Youth programs can be ideal places for youth to develop the skills needed for success in the 21st century workforce (Casner-Lotto, 2006). A focus on workforce preparation could help close both the skills gap and the opportunity gap. By their very nature, youth programs organized around positive youth development contribute to workforce readiness, whether or no they offer opportunities specifically focused on workforce preparation. Although youth programs such as 4-H can be a key resource in preparing young people for the world of work, there is potential to make an even bigger impact with an intentional workforce preparation focus.

Goals of Workforce Preparation

This concept of workforce preparation is not limited to preparing young people to get a job or to follow a specific career path. Instead, by focusing on the skills critical for success in the 21st century workforce, youth will develop skills that are transferable from job to job. Youth development programs can intentionally create experiences that help young people develop the skills they need to succeed as students, employees, and community members.

The overarching goal of workforce preparation is for youth to develop awareness and skills for career success through intentional workforce preparation experiences that include education, experience, and reflection. The objectives of workforce preparation programs are to introduce young people to the world of work and to develop the workforce skills necessary for success through active participation in learning experiences. Workforce preparation strategies must build on an early foundation of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences to most effectively achieve long-term results.

Workforce preparation should provide knowledge about work as well as active learning experiences that put young people in contact with adults in the workplace. These should not be one-shot activities but a continuum of experiences that increase in complexity and challenge in developmentally appropriate ways.

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Key Ingredients for Workforce Preparation

- **Children are ready for workforce preparation experiences at early ages, but the experiences must be developmentally appropriate.**
  Young children are definitely ready for experiences that actively engage them in learning about the world of work. Activities should examine what children do at home and at school, what they see around them in the community, and how their interests and abilities relate to work.

- **Career learning experiences must be intentional.**
  The development of life skills is not an automatic outcome. Many times activities such as career days and field trips are conducted, but are not connected to some larger goals or framework of career development. Specific attention to the world of work concepts may be necessary to make these connections obvious.

- **Provide for active learning experiences that involve active exploration of the world of work.**
  It is important that children do not just learn about work, they get to do work. One way to get work experience is to provide opportunities for volunteer and community service experiences. Exposure to the workplace increases knowledge about jobs, the skills used on the job, and the education and training required to get that job.

- **Provide exposure to a wide variety of career options.**
  Youth cannot choose to pursue a career path if they do not know it exists! Elementary school students generally select a relatively narrow range of career options. Furthermore, they aspire to certain highly visible jobs, such as entertainer and professional athlete. Therefore, it is important to present a wide range of careers, including those with different educational requirements.

- **Provide exposure to career role models.**
  Children’s interests may be expanded or limited by the amount and type of role models with whom they come in contact. Exposure to role models is an important factor in career decision making. When students see people like themselves in a field, they are much more likely to create goals for themselves within that field because it appears more accessible.

- **Focus on skills that would be required for any job.**
  Life skills may be developed in many contexts. They include skills such as learning to work well with others, to make decisions, and to act as a leader. These skills should be present in activities for youth because they are skills that will be useful no matter what job their future holds. Moreover, they are skills that will serve them well in the present!

- **Focus on the processes necessary for workforce and career preparation, not just the content of the choice.**
  Career decision making is not simply a matter of picking a particular occupation, but it is a decision making and problem solving process. Students who are less confident in their ability to complete tasks and behaviors required for effective decision making are also more likely to be undecided about their career. A goal of workforce preparation should be the creation of sense of purpose and future.

- **Once is not enough.**
  Career development is enhanced when individuals have the opportunity to be exposed to the widest possible array of learning experiences. Participation in career development activities, exposure to role models, and engagement in workforce experiences should happen more than once and in more than one way.
Activities that Build Workforce Preparation Skills

Reading Books
Reading books can help youth learn about jobs and careers directly and indirectly. They can read books specifically geared toward teaching about a certain career or youth can discover what careers characters within books may have.

Exploring Careers Online
Assignments to research careers online can help young people gain a better understanding of what jobs exist and what skills are required to perform certain jobs. Even exploring what requirements such as training classes or college courses that are needed for a certain job can help youth understand what it takes to succeed in certain careers. They could share this information in a type of “career fair” with other youth to maximize the potential of this activity.

Career Fairs and Career Days
These experiences provide youth with an opportunity to meet professionals from job fields they are considering. At a career fair or career day, they can ask questions that are important for finding out if a job or career area is a good match for them. Take advantage of any opportunity to get young people talking to professionals in a variety of career pathways.

Job Shadowing
Typically during a job shadowing experience youth spend a couple of hours or even a day with a professional, observing or participating with them at work. They get a chance to ask them questions about that line of work.

Volunteer Work
Encourage youth to consider learning more about the world of work through volunteer or community service opportunities. Perhaps their schools even has graduation requirements where students have to volunteer for a specific amount of hours. Help youth understand how volunteer work helps them build many of the work skills they need for any job, such as:

- Dependability
- Accuracy
- Ability to follow instructions
- Ability to work with a variety of types of people

Debrief after completing any of the above activities. This will give youth the opportunity to reflect on what was learned through their experiences.

The skills youth learn as a volunteer look just as valuable on a resume as those learned at a paid position!