Creating Quality Work-based Learning Programs

Extension professionals across program areas have an opportunity to address the "skills gap" through work-based learning experiences. By learning about the skills young people need, using work-based learning as a model for engaging teens, and utilizing the suggested evaluation strategies, Extension professionals can make the work experience a learning experience for teens.

What is Work-based Learning?
Work-based learning programs can come in many forms, however it can be simply defined as “learning activities that use the workplace as a site for learning” (Keating, 2006, p. 2). Through work-based learning, youth are not just learning about work by observing it, but they are learning in and through doing work (Keating, 2006).

Work-based learning programs involve teens in practical experiences that integrate work and learning. They are real-life experiences that are structured, supervised, and evaluated. Successful programs use the experiential learning model-doing real work, reflecting on these experiences, and generalizing to future life situations.

The work experiences may be paid or unpaid, but they must be clearly viewed by both participants and employers as real work – that is, youth are actively engaged in producing goods or services.

The focus of work-based learning is not simply on working for the sake of having a job, but on an experience that takes the developmental needs of youth participants into account.

Why is Work-based Learning Important?
Many of the skills needed for workforce success develop over time and must be learned through active participation. That is, youth are afforded the opportunity to learn interpersonal skills, cooperation, and teamwork by actually having to work as a team with others in the workplace.

Some employers may be hesitant to work with teens because of their relative inexperience; the potential for youth to contribute to the workplace is often underestimated. However, studies show that work experiences can have a positive impact on both the young people and the businesses or organizations that participate hosting teens as employees in work-based learning programs (see Benefits of Work-based Learning).

Successful work-based learning programs empower young people to be an active participant in their future by taking control of their own learning and experiences. Given the concerns expressed about the need for young people to develop workforce skills, work-based learning is a good model for engaging teens in meaningful service to the public and developing workplace skills and competencies that they can apply now and in the future.
Extension professionals can focus on these three approaches to work-based learning:

1. **Value added**: enhancing an existing program with a work-based learning approach.
2. **Growing your own**: instituting work-based learning by hiring program participants as staff.
3. **Partnering with employers**: in the community to create worksite placements for program participants.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive, nor do they need to build on one another in a progression. A youth program could conceivably apply all three approaches. All three are built on the ten principles of work-based learning:

- Ground work-based learning programs in a positive youth development philosophy.
- Establish partnerships for worksite placement.
- Make good matches between youth and employers.
- Provide opportunities for skill building and career awareness.
- Provide authentic experiences with high expectations.
- Consider opportunities for increasing responsibility and reward.
- Provide orientation and training for adult staff and teens.
- Monitor and support participants and employers throughout the process.
- Understand legal issues and comply with state and federal laws.
- Evaluate and provide feedback.

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**Positive Youth Development Approach**

Programs that produce positive outcomes do not happen by accident, and they share common ground, including a positive youth development approach. In contrast to a deficit perspective, a positive youth development approach is based on the premise that youth are resources to be developed (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Witt & Caldwell, 2005). Current models focus on the concept of thriving, which goes beyond simply eliminating negative behaviors to promoting positive development for all youth (Lerner, Dowling, & Andersen, 2003). Certain key features characterize positive youth development settings including:

- **Positive Relationship with a Caring Adult**
- **Safe Environment – Emotional and Physical**
- **Opportunity for Mastery**
- **Opportunity to Value and Practice Service**
- **Opportunity for Self-determination**
- **To be an Active Participant in the Future**
- **Engagement in Learning**

Two of these key features are particularly relevant for workforce preparation: *positive relationship with a caring adult* and *engagement in learning*.

**Positive Relationship with a Caring Adult**: How young people understand what it means and what it takes to be a productive citizen, as well as the belief in themselves, depends largely on the adult role models and connections they have. A caring adult serves as a guide, mentor, and role model. The caring adult helps set appropriate boundaries and expectations.

**Engagement in Learning**: An engaged youth is one who is not only mindful of the subject area, but building relationships and connections in order to develop understanding. Through self-reflection, the youth’s brain has the ability to learn from experience. The engaged youth has a higher degree of self-motivation and an inexhaustible capacity to create.
Benefits and Challenges of Work-based Learning

Work-based learning can have a positive impact on the youth participating, the business or organizations that employ them (DeCoursey & Skyles, 2007; Ferrari et al., 2008), and the youth programs. Teen apprenticeships can create a rich learning environment where participants develop skills in areas such as teamwork, professionalism, and communication (Halpern, 2006). Employers are often pleasantly surprised with the contributions youth make (Ferrari et al., 2008; Whalen et al., 2003). Other positive effects are summarized in the box “Benefits of Work-based Learning” below. Achieving these benefits is contingent on a positive youth development philosophy including strong adult supervision, mentoring, and skill development (Bryant et al., 2004; Ferrari et al., 2008).

Work-based learning requires commitment from participating youth, employers, and youth programs. The box “Challenges of Work-based Learning” below outlines some of the difficulties these parties face. To overcome these challenges, youth development professionals can prepare teens with skill-building and work-readiness sessions. They can assist employers in understanding the needs of youth so that employers are ready when young people arrive on the job. Some employers are willing to hire teen employees if they can be assured that the youth program will provide adequate supervision (S. Matloff-Nieves, personal communication, December 19, 2007).

Benefits of Work-based Learning

- **Teens**
  - Make connections between real work expectations and the classroom.
  - Pursue education with a greater sense of purpose.
  - Interact with positive adult role models.
  - Develop new skills.
  - Receive feedback on their skill development.
  - Experience enhanced self-concept and self-esteem.
  - Expand their horizons and awareness of future work options.

- **Employers**
  - Enhance skills of their employees (e.g., learning to supervise others).
  - Realize contributions youth make to the workplace.
  - Give back to the community.

- **Youth Organizations**
  - Accomplish their mission.
  - Meet developmental needs.
  - Retain teens in their program.
  - Add authenticity and relevance to the learning experiences they provide.
  - Groom potential employees in their organization.

Challenges of Work-based Learning

- **Teens**
  - Have little or no prior experience in the work world.
  - May have trouble meeting program and workplace expectations for attendance, dress code, and appropriate language.
  - Face logistical challenges such as transportation.

- **Employers**
  - Must be convinced they will gain from participation.
  - May be hesitant to hire youth, fearing they will not be ready for work.
  - Differ in their capacity to provide a work experience that is also a learning experience.
  - May lack experience in supporting the developmental needs of teens.
  - May have to change policies and practices to provide quality work experiences.

- **Youth Organizations**
  - May be hampered by short time frames for producing program results.
  - Face difficulties in investing the time needed to recruit employers, provide training and support, and monitor program implementation.
  - Have to complete considerable paperwork in order to provide financial incentives, which can be vital for the neediest youth.
  - May encounter policies that require paid staff to be 18 years of age.
There are a variety of roles for Extension professionals to play. An Extension professional may decide to plan and implement a new program designed for the express purpose of developing workforce skills (e.g., summer work programs with supervised worksite placements). Or, many existing programs have the potential to be re-designed and implemented as work-based learning.

Some current 4-H program delivery models lend themselves very easily to a work-based learning enhancement such as:

- Camp Counseling
- Service Learning
- Teen Leaders
- CARTEENS
- 4-H Ambassadors
- Junior Fair Board

**Value Added**

Many existing 4-H programs have the potential to be designed and implemented as work-based learning programs. Examples include camp counseling, CARTEENS (a teen-led vehicular safety program), 4-H Ambassadors, and Junior Fair Board. By viewing leadership programs from a workforce preparation lens, they can be transformed into high quality work-based learning experiences.

Service-learning and volunteering use the community as a context for helping youth develop and apply critical skills that are important in the workplace and in life generally, and can therefore be part of a comprehensive approach to workforce preparation. While many existing programs, such as camp counseling, are already high quality experiences, by viewing them through a workforce lens they can serve two purposes: the initial goals of the program and work-based learning objectives.

An example of applying this intentional focus is Greene County’s Friends Care Intergenerational Garden. This was originally designed primarily as a community service project and a way to learn gardening skills. With an intentional focus on workforce preparation, performance appraisals, self-assessment, and reflection opportunities were added, and it became a work-based learning program as well. By adding these components, the program accomplished its original goals and much more, resulting in a richer experience for the participants.

**Growing Your Own**

Growing your own is a natural progression from participant to teen leader to teen employee to adult staff member. From a youth development perspective, it is a means to provide young people with increasingly challenging roles and responsibilities that can facilitate their development of important workforce skills and dispositions. From a practical standpoint, the concept makes sense as a way to address current staffing needs. It also makes sense as a way to develop future employees who have a commitment to the mission and goals of our Extension organizations.
Recommended Programming Strategies

How to Develop & Implement Programs with Work-based Learning in Mind

➢ **Start early** — Youth age 12 to 15 can be highly motivated and have fewer competing interests for their time. They will require more supervision, but it can be worth the investment.

➢ **Be deliberate and intentional** — Plan for your program to be a work-based learning program and communicate that clearly.

➢ **Set the stage** — Provide understandable and specific expectations to adults and teens at the very beginning of the program.

➢ **Provide training for adults on their roles** — Adults need to understand the goals of the program and understand how to facilitate learning experiences for teens.

➢ **Afford teens real work experiences** — Teens need to feel like what they are doing matters and is worthy of their time and effort.

➢ **Build reflection into the process** — The use of the experiential learning model for work-related activities and experiences deepens the learning and helps to apply lessons learned to future situations. Look for ways to structure this into the work experience naturally as opposed to “special reflection time” that always relies on a facilitator.

➢ **Use authentic assessments/evaluations** — Performance appraisals, self-reflection, journals, and solicited feedback all work easily into the process when a program is viewed through the work-based learning lens.

➢ **Remain realistic** — Start small in the scope and depth of the program. Build on successes in future efforts. Add a few features in subsequent programs.

➢ **Communicate results to stakeholders** — Share results in a way that shows how young people are developing the skills necessary for success in the 21st century.
Key Ingredients for Success

Recommendations to consider when developing a work-based learning program include the following:

• **Ground work-based learning programs in a positive youth development philosophy.** This recommendation should be self-evident, but we feel it cannot be overstated. The key features of positive youth development must provide the foundation for work-based learning programs in order to meet adolescents’ needs in developmentally appropriate ways. When work-based learning programs are based on youth development principles, they are more likely to accomplish their objectives.

• **Establish partnerships for worksite placements.** Successful workforce preparation initiatives require strong community partnerships—a collaboration of all stakeholders. The strength of these partnerships is based on relationships and communication, both of which require an investment of time that pays dividends in the long term. Look for opportunities to partner with other agencies. Partnering with these programs and serving as a worksite could be a potential source for paying youth for their work.

• **Make good matches between youth and employers.** Youth programs must gather enough information to understand the worksites, the work environment, job duties, and the individuals involved.

• **Provide authentic experiences with high expectations.** Work-based learning programs must provide real experience, not busywork. Also, simply doing the work is not enough. Employers and program staff should hold participants to high expectations and provide honest evaluations. If the goal is improvement, then mistakes are part of the process. Young people who face high expectations are more likely to be well prepared for work and life.

• **Provide orientation and training for adult staff and teens.** Training and support for employers, who may not be well prepared for working with young people and the challenges of supporting their development, is vital, particularly because interactions in the job settings typically available to teens are not always supportive. Orientation and training provides clear expectations and builds skills for both youth and adults.

• **Focus on transferable skills.** Since many of the skills needed for workforce success develop over time and must be learned through active participation, work-based learning programs are ideal places to teach those skills. Focus on the applied skills that will transfer from job to job. Communication, interpersonal, and problem solving skills are well supported by 4-H’s positive youth development philosophy and are increasingly being identified by employers as key skills employers need.

• **Provide opportunities for skill building and career awareness.** To be most effective, work-based learning experiences need to be preceded by work readiness activities. This foundation may be provided through other experiences, or may need to be incorporated into a work-based learning program. Look for ways to integrate work readiness development components into the work-based learning program (e.g., having a session on filling out an application or writing a resume, including interviews as part of the process and providing feedback). These can be very powerful learning opportunities when skill development activities are grounded in real work experience.
Key Ingredients for Success (cont.)

• Dedicate a staff member’s time to manage the details of the work-based learning program.

• Understand legal issues and comply with state and federal laws. Work-based learning program staff needs to be aware of child labor laws, distinctions between employee (paid) and non-employee (unpaid) status, requirements for work permits and insurance, and what minors can and cannot do in the workplace. See http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/4109

• Monitor and support participants and employers throughout the process. Teens may require support to be successful on the job, but many employers are not prepared to deal with issues teens bring to the workplace. Youth programs should create a plan for providing such support. Periodic site visits or phone calls can encourage communication between programs and worksites. Regular sessions with youth participants build reflection and problem solving into the work experience. Regular checkpoints allow for mid-course corrections rather than waiting until the program ends.

• Evaluate and provide feedback. Evaluation and feedback make the work experience a continuous learning experience. The use of written reflections in journals, participation in performance appraisals, and facilitated group discussions help to make the work experience a learning experience. This process puts responsibilities on teens for their own learning but gives them structure to do so.

• Consider opportunities for increasing responsibility and reward. The practice of paying a salary or providing incentives can be an important part of an authentic experience. The financial rewards may motivate teens to stay connected at a time when they may lose interest or drop out of youth programs because outside work conflicts with their participation. As skills are mastered, work experiences can become progressively more challenging and complex; the reward of increased responsibility becomes intrinsically motivating. Programs and employers should gradually build levels of responsibility through scaffolded leadership opportunities. Scaffolding is a process in which youth are given support until they can apply new skills and strategies independently. When youth are learning new or difficult tasks, they are given more assistance. As they begin to demonstrate task mastery, the assistance or support is decreased gradually in order to shift the responsibility for learning from the instructor to the student. Thus, as they assume more responsibility for their learning, the teacher provides less support.