

URBAN ALLIANCE: PREPARING YOUTH FOR EMPLOYMENT THROUGH INTERNSHIPS AND MENTORSHIP



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KEY MESSAGES:

- Early work experiences have been shown in the literature to have many benefits, especially for low-income and at risk youths. Urban Alliance provides internships and mentorship for disadvantaged youth to help them transition into adulthood and prepare them for college.
- Urban Alliance has a well-developed internal monitoring and evaluation system. An external evaluation of the program suggests positive impacts on college enrollment and job skills.

Introduction

Many youths in the District of Columbia are out of work and out of school. The high school graduation rate in the District of Columbia (DC) for 2014-15 was 64.4 percent in public schools. This was four points higher than in 2013-14, but it remains too low. The graduation rate for public charter schools also increased by 2.8 percentage points to reach 71.7 percent. For all public school students, the graduation rate was 65.4 percent. In addition, many of the students who graduate from high school do not go to college. Of those, a large share are unemployed or underemployed in part due to lack of employment skills.

Urban Alliance is a nonprofit organization that aims to facilitate the transition from high school to college and employment for disadvantaged youth in the District of Columbia, Baltimore, Chicago, and Northern Virginia. It does so by running a comprehensive early employment program that provides access and exposure to professional networks for youth enrolled in the program. This brief explains why such programs are needed, how Urban Alliance works, and how it monitors its performance. Results from an external evaluation are also provided.

Box 1: District of Columbia Education Series Primer

Why a series of briefs on innovations in education in the District of Columbia? While much of the work of the Education Practice at the World Bank focuses on low and middle income countries, insights from innovations in OECD countries can also be highly valuable when thinking about education policy. This series focuses on innovative programs in Washington, DC.

What are the topics discussed in the series? The series looks at a number of innovative programs related among others to the curriculum, student learning, tutoring, and skills for the labor market. Private provision through charter schools is also discussed. Many of the programs have received support from the World Bank Community Connections or individual Bank staff.

What are the questions asked in this note? The question is: How does Urban Alliance work, how does the organization monitor its performance, and what is this impact on students?

How is the question answered? After a discussion of the benefits of early experience programs, the brief explains how Urban Alliance provides internships and mentorship for youth. Results from a randomized impact evaluation are also shared.

Millions of young Americans lack the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in jobs or school.

Nearly 6.7 million young people (ages 16-24) throughout the country are out of work and out of school¹. The total is staggering, but made worse by the fact that it is disproportionately made up by young people of color and children from low-income families. As recently as 2012, the high school dropout rate for African American and Hispanic youth was double and triple the rate of white youth². Similarly, the rates of college enrollment³ and employment⁴ for African American and Hispanic youth lag far behind their white peers.

Disconnecting from school and work has devastating consequences not just for the affected individual, but for society as well. Each young person who disconnects from school or work will cost over \$700,000 over his or her lifetime in lost earnings, lower economic growth, lower tax revenue, and higher government spending. Accounting for all disconnected youth, the total taxpayer burden tops \$1.5 trillion⁵. While many of the disconnected youth have no schooling, others have accumulated years of education, including graduating high school. Graduating from high school can no longer be the goal; it is far from a guarantee of success. Interventions are needed while students are in school to help them successfully transition into adulthood. Policymakers face a choice: invest in interventions now, or pay more for remediation later.

Many youth are out of school and out of work. Graduating from high school is not enough. Interventions are needed while students are in school to help them transition into adulthood and avoid the high cost of disconnected youth.

Youth-work force training can provide vital support systems that young people need, and they can dramatically improve young people's academic, social, and financial outcomes in numerous ways.

The research on youth employment programs is vast and multifaceted. Early work experience has been shown to:

- *Improve education outcomes:* Early work experiences help participants graduate from high school and attain higher levels of education⁶. Four out of five high school drop outs responding to a survey commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation said that real world experience would have helped them stay in school⁷.
- *Help develop soft skills:* Employment experiences give students the opportunities to develop "soft" or "professional" skills, such as the abilities to collaborate, communicate, and problem solve. These skills have been linked to increases in educational attainment, employability, and wages⁸.
- *Change motivations and definitions of success:* Students who work during school are more motivated and likely to link school work with future success⁹.
- *Develop sense of self-efficacy:* Paid opportunities and opportunities that provide opportunities to advance help students develop a strong sense of self-efficacy¹⁰. These opportunities help students understand how to make decisions about education and careers¹¹.
- *Improve future employment and earnings:* Having worked in a given year increases a young person's chances of being employed the following year by over 80 percentage points¹². Participating in a youth employment program can increase a participant's salary by as much as 11 percent as many as eight years after high school¹³.

These benefits are especially important for low-income youth and those at-risk of dropping out of school, as these populations have an increased risk of unemployment, poverty, poor health and incarceration.

Early work experiences have been shown in the literature to have multiple benefits, including in terms of improved education outcomes, soft skills development, motivation, sense of self-efficacy, and future employment and earnings. These early experiences are especially important for low-income youth and at risk populations.

¹ Belfield, C.R., Levin, H.M., and Rosen, R. (2012). *The economic value of opportunity youth*.

² Data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

³ Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

⁴ Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., Trubskyy, M., and Ross, M. with McHugh, W., and Palma, S. (2014). *The plummeting labor market fortunes of teens and young adults*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

⁵ Belfield et al., op cit.

⁶ Smith, T. et al. (2012). *Youth and Work: Restoring Teen and Young Adult Connections to Opportunity*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

⁷ Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J., and Morison, K.B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.

⁸ Heckman, J.J., and Kautz, T.D. (2012). *Hard Evidence on Soft Skills*. Working Paper 18121, Boston: NBER.

⁹ Sum, A. et al. (2008). *The Collapse of the National Teen Job Market and the Case for an Immediate Summer and Year Round Youth Jobs Creation Program*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University.

¹⁰ Finch, M.D., Shanahan, M., Mortimer, J.T., and Ryu, S. (1991). *Work experience and control orientation in adolescence*. *American Sociological Review* 56: 597-611.

¹¹ Mortimer, J.T. (2010). *The benefits and risks of adolescent employment.* *Prev Res* 17(2): 8-11.

¹² Sum et al. (2014), op. cit.

¹³ Holzer, H. (n.d.) *Workforce Training: What Works? Who Benefits?*

Urban Alliance uses professional skills training, work experience, and mentorship to help young people connect to pathways that lead to self-sufficiency.

Effective youth employment programs combine a number of elements: direct work experience or placement, counseling and mentorship, individual support, and post-secondary planning. While many programs focus on one of these elements, Urban Alliance's model combines all of them. Since its founding in 1996, the organization has placed over 2,000 young people in professional internships and served over 15,000 through professional skills training across four regions: Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, MD; Chicago, IL; and Northern Virginia in Arlington and Alexandria. Urban Alliance's core program, its high school internship program, has five elements

1. *Skills Training:* Interns receive training in professional soft skills, financial literacy, and post-secondary planning before internship placement through "pre-work" training. This training aims to ensure that participants are ready to add value on the first day of their internship. Pre-work covers effective communication, appropriate dress, and conflict resolution. Once interns are placed at jobsites, they receive weekly professional development during "Friday Workshop" that reinforce the skills practiced during the week and help interns plan for life after high school.
2. *Direct work experience:* Interns are placed in internships to practice their skills and gain access and exposure to professional networks. Interns can gain up to 600 hours of professional experience, working part-time during the school year and full time during the summer and breaks.
3. *Mentorship:* Interns are paired with jobsite mentors who supervise and provide feedback to work tasks, help establish professional networks, and advise on professional development and growth. Mentors evaluate the interns four times per year on key soft skills,
4. *Case Management:* Urban Alliance Program Coordinators guide interns' transition into work, liaise between the mentor and intern, oversee post-high school planning, and resolve development issues as needed. Program Coordinators act as counselors, providing advice on an array of issues from work and family to the student's future.
5. *Alumni Services:* Urban Alliance alumni teams provide support to program alumni who are both connected to and disconnected from school and work. Alumni staff review resumes and cover letters, help find future employment opportunities, assist in navigating college and continue to act as counselors when needed.

Urban Alliance routinely partners with over 200 employers each year. Employers vary greatly in size and function – from large, private companies including major banks and

law firms, to government agencies and local nonprofits. Industries include financial services, healthcare, hospitality, legal services, media and entertainment, real estate and technology, among others. Employers make an annual tax-exempt donation to Urban Alliance, which covers student wages, student activities, direct program staff, and related administrative overhead.

Three elements are combined in the internships to foster personal growth and improve outcomes for participating youth: professional soft skills, mentorship, and setting.

Jobs are an important component of any youth employment program, but employment is not sufficient to prevent disconnection. Urban Alliance believes in the need to combine three elements to foster personal growth and improve outcomes for youth.

- *Professional Soft Skills:* Urban Alliance teaches and tests for a number of soft skills – each linked to positive increases in life outcomes, including employment, education and wages. It helps its mentors – jobsite supervisors staffed by the corporate partner – think through projects and activities that encourage students to build these skills. Students' skills growth and exposure are evaluated using a rubric that the mentor fills out four times per year. A baseline is established two weeks after the start date and retested in three subsequent evaluations. Urban Alliance defines two types of skills: growth and expectation skills. Growth skills are expected to improve as they are practiced during the internship. These skills are evaluated on a 1 to 4 scale, where '4' is the equivalent of a full-time staffer. Expectation skills, evaluated on a binary scale, are expected to be mastered as soon as pre-work is completed.
- *Mentorship:* A caring, positive adult – not just one who gives performance feedback and sets expectations, but rather one that builds a trusting relationship – helps foster leadership skills and responsibility. Each Urban Alliance youth is supported by two adults. The first, the Program Coordinator, or PC, is an Urban Alliance employee. The PC helps the intern navigate the professional internship and also teaches the training curriculum. The PC provides case management services as needed, across multiple topics including social issues, education issues, and work related issues. The second adult is the jobsite mentor. Staffed by the corporate partner, the mentor monitors tasks on the jobsite, and gives access to his or her professional network.
- *Setting:* The actual internship location is used as part of the intervention. Many Urban Alliance youth have never been to their city's business center or downtown. The program helps students obtain opportunities where they would not have had access otherwise. While many of the skills and mentoring conversations

could take place in a number of settings, including less professional internships, the networks and visibility offered by the internships cannot be replicated through the standard opportunities working teenagers get.

Internal monitoring and external evaluation suggest the program is having a positive impact on youth.

Urban Alliance uses active program evaluation and performance management to ensure the program is run to fidelity and achieves results. The organization employs two full time evaluators to identify key data to collect, analyze, and interpret based on the program goals and logic model. The evaluators work with each program team to assess program strengths and improvement areas.

The performance management system is designed to let the organization know when it's off track to meet programmatic targets. It uses a detailed logic model to help ensure program fidelity, highlighting both dosage and output targets for each programmatic component. From intern retention to workshop attendance, post-secondary readiness to quality case management, each aspect of the program is tracked and stored. These data populate performance scorecards, which are distributed to the entire organization and discussed in monthly program meetings, allowing for real-time course correction.

Using national research and evidence, and with input from leading think tanks, Urban Alliance has developed an assessment tool capturing access, exposure and growth in critical "soft" or professional skills. The assessment relies on jobsite supervisors to observe student behaviors in the internship. Skills are assessed four times per year, starting with a baseline evaluation distributed approximately two weeks after the intern's start. Urban Alliance analyzes the results after each assessment, and looks for trends through a national, regional and student-level lens. The data are fed back to each program team, who integrate the findings into weekly workshops.

Urban Alliance exists to help young people connect to pathways that lead to self-sufficiency. Program data and evaluation systems are used to closely monitor outcomes.

Data collection continues after program completion. Urban Alliance uses the National Student Clearinghouse, a leader on college enrollment verification, to track the college enrollment and persistence of its alumni. Students who do not enroll in college, or exit prematurely, are followed up by the Urban Alliance alumni services team. The team is given an interview protocol, covering topics from the reason the intern didn't enroll to their participation in an alternate pathway such as employment or a training program. These interviews are important for two reasons: first, they paint a more complete picture of youth connection by

including employment outcomes; and second, they offer valuable feedback on the Urban Alliance program model. This system of continuous learning has led to innovation and program enhancements. As a result, 100 percent of interns completing the program graduate high school and 90 percent are accepted into college. Over 80 percent enroll in college, and 80 percent persist after the first year.

External evaluation results suggest that Urban Alliance is having a positive impact on beneficiaries¹⁴.

Urban Alliance is in the midst of a 6-year randomized control trial study conducted by the Urban Institute. The study follows two cohorts of students from the graduating classes of 2011 and 2012 in the Washington, D.C., and Baltimore regions. Applicants were randomized at the point of application. Those randomized as treatment were invited to the pre-work training, while those randomized as control were not offered access to the program.

An external evaluation of the program suggests positive impacts on college enrollment and job preparation skills.

Preliminary results from the study are positive:

- *College enrollment for males:* Urban Alliance demonstrated large impacts on the probability of males attending college. Males in the treatment group were 11 percentage points more likely to attend college. A separate "Treated-on-the-treatment" study found that completing the program increased the likelihood of attendance by 26 percentage points over the control.
- *College for middle-tier students:* The study differentiated grouped participants by GPA range (below 2.0, 2.0-3.0, and above 3.0) and found a large impact for middle-tier students. Participating in the Urban Alliance program increased the probability of attending a four-year college by 12 percentage points. The gain was 21 percentage points when completing the program.
- *Job preparation:* The study found positive and statistically significant impacts on hard skill comfort and soft skill comfort.

A final report for the evaluation, which will include college persistence data, is expected to be released in 2017.

The author is with the Urban Alliance. This series of briefs was launched as a collaborative effort between the Education Practice at the World Bank, the Community Outreach Program at the World Bank, and the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill. Please contact Quentin Wodon at qwodon@worldbank.org for information. The brief series is part of the SABER Equity and Inclusion program that benefitted from the support of the Global Partnership for Education. The evaluation of the Urban Alliance program was funded in part by a grant from the World Bank. The opinions expressed in this brief are those of the authors only. They may not represent the views of the World Bank, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent, nor those of the Urban Alliance.

¹⁴ Data from forthcoming Urban Institute evaluation report.