



# Success at Every Step: How 23 Programs Support Youth on the Path to College and Beyond

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AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM

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## A M E R I C A N Y O U T H P O L I C Y F O R U M

### *Bridging Youth Policy, Practice, and Research*

#### **Mission:**

*To improve opportunities, services, and life prospects for youth, we provide learning experiences for national, state, and local policymakers and practitioners.*

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), a nonprofit, nonpartisan professional development organization based in Washington, DC, provides learning opportunities for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working on youth and education issues at the national, state, and local levels. AYPF's goal is to enable participants to become more effective in the development, enactment, and implementation of sound policies affecting the nation's young people by providing information, insights, and networks to better understand the development of healthy and successful young people, productive workers, and participating citizens in a democratic society. AYPF does not lobby or advocate for positions on pending legislation. Rather, we believe that greater intellectual and experiential knowledge of youth issues will lead to sounder, more informed policymaking. We strive to generate a climate of constructive action by enhancing communication, understanding, and trust among youth policy professionals.

Founded in 1993, AYPF has interacted with thousands of policymakers by conducting an average of 40 annual events such as lunchtime forums, out-of-town field trips, and policy-focused discussion groups. Participants include Congressional staff; federal, state, and local government officials; national nonprofit and advocacy association professionals; and the press corps. At forums, these professionals interact with renowned thinkers, researchers, and practitioners to learn about national and local strategies for formal and informal education, career preparation, and the development of youth as resources through service and skill development activities. Study tour participants visit schools undergoing comprehensive reforms, afterschool and community learning sites, and youth employment and training centers, where they learn experientially from the young people and adults in the field.

AYPF focuses on three overlapping themes: Education, Youth Development and Community Involvement, and Preparation for Careers and Workforce Development. AYPF publishes a variety of nationally disseminated youth policy reports and materials, many of which may be viewed on our website ([www.aypf.org](http://www.aypf.org)).

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# Executive Summary

## About this Publication

**T**his publication is designed to help policymakers and practitioners learn about programs and policies that have been effective in helping youth become ready for college and careers. Twenty-three evaluations of programs that support youth as they prepare for college and careers are briefly summarized to give policymakers and practitioners a quick understanding of the research findings on effective programs along with a description of why the programs work. The 23 programs summarized in this publication clearly do not represent the universe of programs that are successful in helping youth prepare for college and careers; rather, they are ones that had quality evaluations. This review was also limited to programs that serve older youth, primarily middle and high school youth.

## Setting the Stage

### *The Imperative for College and Career Preparation*

Obtaining a high school diploma is no longer sufficient for young people who hope to land a job that pays a family-sustaining wage in today's economy. Without some type of education beyond high school (four-year college, two-year college, an industry certificate, or apprenticeship program), most young adults will find themselves out in the cold in the current labor market. Postsecondary education plays an increasingly important role in economic mobility for youth from low-income communities, and the financial benefits of education for young adults have only risen since the 1980s. Four-year college graduates earn approximately one million dollars more over their lifetimes than those with only a high school diploma. Higher levels of education translate to higher earnings for all racial and ethnic groups. Closing the racial and income-based achievement gaps within US schools would increase the nation's productivity, raising the Gross Domestic Product by \$400 billion or more.

Education is also associated with improved health and increased civic participation. Moreover, the education of today's young adults bears significant consequences for the next generation, as

parental education is a strong predictor of children's achievement, college-going rates, and future income.

### *College- and Career-Readiness: A Distant Reality*

Despite the importance of postsecondary education, many youth in the United States never even earn a high school diploma. Approximately one-quarter of all students do not graduate from high school in four years. For the class of 2006, graduation rates hovered at 55 percent or lower for African American, Native American, and Latino youth, and that number dropped to 44 percent for African American males. Across the educational pipeline, African American and Latino students lag approximately two to three years behind their White peers, in terms of achievement and graduation rates. Approximately 7,200 US students drop out of high school each day.

With regard to college enrollment, low-income students are 23 percentage points less likely to enroll directly in college than high-income students, and the corresponding gap is 35 percentage points when comparing students with a parent who has obtained a bachelor's degree to those whose parents had no college experience.

In addition to low levels of college-readiness, many young people leave high school without critical skills and competencies for success in the labor market. Employers indicate that the level of preparation of many youth is inadequate for entry-level jobs in fields offering career ladders and pathways to a family-sustaining wage. Sixty percent of employers rate high school graduates' basic skills as "fair or poor." In today's unforgiving labor market, youth who are high school dropouts, ex-offenders, aging out of the foster care system, English language learners, or students with disabilities have the hardest time overcoming labor market barriers, and are most likely to join the growing ranks of disconnected youth.

### *Framework for College- and Career-Readiness*

AYPF takes a broad view of the concept of college- and career-readiness, expanding it to include the concept of success, not just readiness. By this definition, readiness means being prepared to success-

fully complete credit-bearing college coursework or industry certification without remediation, having the academic skills and self-motivation necessary to persist and progress in postsecondary education, and having identified career goals and the necessary steps to achieve them. Readiness also requires the developmental maturity to thrive in the increasingly independent worlds of postsecondary education and careers, the cultural knowledge to understand the expectations of the college environment and labor market, and the employer-desired skills to succeed in an innovation-based economy. In order for students to be successful in this broader framework of expectations, they need rigorous academic preparation, college and career planning, academic and social supports, employer-desired skills, and personal resources.

It is also important, in the discussion of college- and career-readiness, to recognize that youth will choose their own paths in life, with some young people charging forward on a traditional four-year college pathway and others moving equally quickly to pathways that are more technically- or occupationally-oriented. In either case, policymakers and educators need to acknowledge that young people will make diverse choices (due to family background,

Youth and their families should be able to wisely determine the professions, careers, and vocations they wish to pursue rather than having a particular path dictated to them because of the failure of the school system to provide students with the “right” gateway courses; offer sufficient information and counseling in the college admission and financial aid processes; and dispel the myth that some youth do not need or will not be able to succeed in college.

economic needs, interests, and innate abilities), and that some choices will blend college and careers, whereas others will focus predominately on one or the other. For example, the postsecondary education pathway required for a Certified Production Assistant or Registered Nurse will differ from that required for a college history professor or attorney. Each of these students is on a valuable pathway that can lead to economic independence, even though

the types and levels of prerequisite education differ. Youth and their families should be able to wisely determine the professions, careers, and vocations they wish to pursue rather than having a particular path dictated to them because of the failure of the school system to provide students with the “right” gateway courses; offer sufficient information and counseling in the college admission and financial aid processes; and dispel the myth that some youth do not need or will not be able to succeed in college.

### **College Retention and Completion**

While this publication primarily focuses on programs that help youth graduate from high school prepared to enter college and careers, access represents only part of the story. Getting in the door to college does not necessarily equal college completion, and many students drop out of college before completing a degree or certificate. Although recent efforts to expand access to postsecondary education have yielded positive results, today’s college students face myriad academic, economic, and social challenges that affect their chances for success in higher education. Nationally, college persistence and graduation rates leave much room for improvement, and the achievement gaps that exist between subgroups in the K-12 school system persist in the college years.

Policymakers and practitioners must bring college persistence and completion to the forefront of conversations regarding educational opportunity. The challenge is to figure out how to graduate more young people, across all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, with degrees and certificates that enhance their long-term career prospects and earning potential.

### **Logic Model**

Because the process of developing young people who are college- and career-ready is complicated and multi-faceted, AYPF has developed a comprehensive logic model to illustrate what it takes to prepare youth for postsecondary education, careers, and long-term success. This logic model is based on the information drawn from an analysis of the 23 effective programs included in this compendium. Rather than a trajectory with distinct phases, the logic model should be viewed as a fluid set of experiences and processes, allowing youth to continuously build their knowledge and skills, providing direction and support systems at every level, and incorporating choices and multiple opportunities for young people to shape their own pathways to success.

AYPF posits that if young people have access to a range of quality supports that lead to the attainment of foundational knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal resources, they will achieve positive outcomes at every stage of the educational and developmental process.

First, young people need a Foundation for Learning and Growth that consists of knowledge, skills, and abilities, such as academic content; academic success behaviors; technical, problem-solving, teamwork, and goal-setting skills; and college and career knowledge. Personal resources, such as motivation, self-efficacy, resilience, and financial support for postsecondary education, also play a crucial role in the Foundation for Learning and Growth.

The logic model holds that if young people possess this foundation, they will have a greater likelihood of achieving positive academic, professional, and personal outcomes across the short-term, intermediate, and long-term future. The short-term outcomes of the programs included in the compendium take place during the middle and high school years and measure academic performance, planning for college and careers, and the development of personal resources. Commonly measured indicators of success include improved academic performance, engagement in school, high school graduation, and planning for college.

Intermediate outcomes take place during the years of postsecondary education and occupational training, and include indicators of postsecondary academic performance (such as credit accrual or degree attainment), career-related outcomes (employment, wages, attainment of industry credentials), and the development of higher-level personal resources such as increased independence and maturity.

The long-term outcomes of the logic model are career success, civic engagement, and the capacity for lifelong learning. AYPF believes that the ultimate goal of any effort to help students become college- and career-ready is to develop economically independent adults, who are involved in their communities and civic life, and who value and participate in continuous learning.

There are many ways for youth to develop their Foundation for Learning and Growth and reach positive outcomes. Youth need a continuum of supports to develop their knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal resources at each level of the educational and developmental pipeline. Services and programs can be provided by many different individuals and types of organizations across the public and private

spheres. Key providers of supports include the family and caregivers, schools, medical and social service providers, community-based organizations, private providers of academic support, employers, and institutions of higher education. Sometimes it is easy for youth to access these institutions and individuals, but in many cases youth need direction and guidance to such resources. Providers of education and youth services influence young people's trajectory by setting high expectations; serving as caring role models; providing guidance, counseling, and assistance in completing college applications; offering academic support through tutoring or enrichment activities; providing financial support through scholarships; and exposing youth to college, internships, work-based experiences.

Our logic model shows the complexity of the process for youth to develop the foundational knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal resources required for success and helps to demonstrate that the path will be different for each young person. The logic model brings coherence to a complex process and can help policymakers and practitioners better understand how the entire process flows, how the various systems interconnect (or do not connect), and where supports might be missing.

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### Methodology in Selecting Evaluations

In selecting evaluations to include for analysis, AYPF looked for comparative, external, or third-party evaluations of programs that aimed to help youth progress along a pathway to postsecondary success and that touched upon some aspect of the logic model used in this publication. The scope of potential programs for inclusion was quite broad, spanning the fields of comprehensive school reform, career and technical education, expanded learning opportunities, college access, dual enrollment, and postsecondary student services. During this process, AYPF also sought out evaluations that were published within the past five years.

AYPF identified 23 programs for inclusion. All of these program evaluations had a control or comparison group design, allowing researchers to examine the outcomes of the program participants relative to similar students or schools. Seven evaluations used an experimental, random assignment design, and the remainder used a quasi-experimental design with comparison groups. Some of the programs have longitudinal evaluations that followed former program participants for a number of years, whereas other studies examined short-term outcomes immediately following a one-semester or one-year intervention. A number of studies measured findings

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at the student level, allowing researchers to disaggregate data based on individual characteristics, while others only collected school-level data. Each profile provides an overview of the program; AYPF's analysis of the elements that may have contributed to the program's success; AYPF's Policy Takeaways, which are key

points related to the program that AYPF believes can inform policy; an overview of the key findings; a description of the program and the evaluation methodology; funding sources; and contact information.

### Elements of Success

A number of common themes that emerge in these profiles may contribute to the programs' effectiveness in improving educational, career-related, and developmental outcomes. Ten Elements of Success have been identified from the 23 evaluations. The Elements of Success are grouped into two broad categories: Programmatic Elements of Success and Structural and System-Focused Elements of Success. The Programmatic Elements of Success include factors related to the content and interactions that characterize young people's experiences in the programs, such as Rigor and Academic Support, Relationships, College Knowledge and Access, Relevance, Youth-Centered Programs, and Effective Instruction. Structural and System-Focused Elements of Success include factors related to the context and environment in which the programs operate, such as Partnerships and

Cross-Systems Collaboration; Strategic Use of Time; Leadership and Autonomy; and Effective Assessment and Use of Data.

It is worth noting that a few of the Elements of Success were repeatedly cited across the majority of the program evaluations. In particular, the areas of Rigor and Academic Support (cited 18 times), Relationships (cited 17 times), and Partnerships and Cross-Systems Collaboration (cited 13 times) appear to be important shared aspects of many effective programs promoting college- and career-readiness and success.

### Outcomes

The programs included in this compendium have a positive impact on young people's preparation for postsecondary success at various stages of their educational, professional, and personal development. Broadly speaking, they increase the number of young people who graduate from high school prepared to make informed decisions about education and training and who are ready to succeed in college and careers. Participants in these programs are more likely to be engaged in school, take advanced courses, apply for financial aid, enroll in college, earn postsecondary degrees, and find employment. The most common outcomes measured in the compendium can be organized into the categories of Secondary-Level Academic Outcomes, Planning for College and Careers, Postsecondary Academic Outcomes, Career-Related Outcomes, and Developing Personal Resources.

The most commonly measured and observed findings were academic outcomes in middle or high school. Overall, 20 evaluations measured academic outcomes at the secondary level, and all 20 demonstrated evidence of effectiveness. Many of the programs in the compendium aimed to increase postsecondary access. Five evaluations specifically examined behaviors and contextual knowledge related to planning for postsecondary education, each of which had a positive impact in this area. Overall, 10 evaluations measured college-level academic outcomes, including enrollment, persistence, grades, credit accumulation, and degree completion, and nine demonstrated a positive impact. Only four evaluations measured career-related outcomes, and three demonstrated statistically significant impacts in this area. Nine evaluations measured outcomes related to the development of personal resources, at either the secondary or postsecondary level, and all nine demonstrated positive outcomes on at least one indicator.

## Policy Recommendations

Policymakers at the national and state levels are in key positions to help create an overall framework and expectation of college- and career-readiness for all students. They can help establish system-wide goals, based on the long-term outcomes identified in the logic model, and hold all the various providers accountable for meeting those goals. Setting up common and long-term goals across programs and systems is a difficult undertaking, but moving toward shared accountability for youth outcomes, across various funding streams, should result in greater coherence and ultimately more resources targeted at a common challenge. This should also result in improved services for students, more comprehensive approaches, and fewer opportunities for youth to fall through the cracks as they transition from one program, system, or level to another. Finally, programs will be working toward the same goal, with the same framework, and each program will see how it fits into a larger whole.

Based on the review of the evaluations AYPF suggests the following general guidelines for policy:

- Develop a comprehensive plan with various agencies, systems, and programs to ensure that a continuum of services, from middle school to college completion, is provided to all youth across the community, and that targeted services are made available to the youth who need them most.
- Hold all providers accountable for shared outcomes that lead to career success, civic engagement, and the capacity for lifelong learning.
- Support collaboration among providers to address the needs of students in a comprehensive manner by allowing greater flexibility in funding, reducing barriers to coordination, and supporting the role of intermediaries that help to pull services and providers together.
- Ensure that the full range of education and youth service providers, such as afterschool, alternative education programs, employers, colleges, community-based organizations, and social services, are involved as partners in the college- and career-readiness system.

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- Place a value on the attainment of not only academic skills, but also the full range of knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal resources that are necessary for career success, civic engagement, and lifelong learning. Promote the development and use of assessments that measure more than academic skills, including the competencies that are valued by employers.
- Support initiatives that use time to increase learning opportunities that occur during out-of-school hours or that use the school-day hours differently with the purpose of adding time for learning and skill development in nonacademic areas. Some of these approaches could involve the blending of secondary and postsecondary learning opportunities to accelerate learning.
- Ensure that youth who drop out of middle or high school have opportunities to reconnect to education programs that lead into college and career pathways, and that the programs are targeted to their needs and status.
- Build the capacity of the adults within the various systems so they have a commitment to high expectations for all youth and the skills to provide high-quality services to young people based on their needs and interests.
- Collect data from various systems over time to assess progress toward long-term outcomes and use the data to improve programs and services.

## Closing

The process of preparing young people for college- and career-readiness is not an easy or quick undertaking, and many systems need to work together to provide the necessary supports and services to achieve this goal. The evaluations profiled in this compendium indicate many effective strategies to

help young people during this process, which have informed the logic model and framework for college- and career-readiness. Using the logic model and the information gained from each effective program can help policymakers as they seek ways to improve the career success, civic engagement, and capacity for lifelong learning of all young people.



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