

GUIDE TO GIVING

Youth Career Development



EDUCATION AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

STEP 1 Understanding the Recommended Approach to Youth Career Development

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Are you interested in youth career development? This guide will help you assess the effectiveness of the programs you are considering supporting. It is based on Social Impact Research's (SIR) methodology for analyzing programs, which identifies the best approaches for addressing the targeted social issue. For more information, read SIR's social issue and state reports on youth career development.

An effective organization should incorporate all three of the components of the recommended approach, or have partnerships with other organizations to cover the full range of services included in these components.

In addition, these organizations should collect data to measure the outcomes and impact of their programs.

- A. Applied skills development
- B. Career exposure
- C. Youth development services
- D. Outcomes and impact

SIR recommends that donors interested in youth career development support programs that provide meaningful work experience. These programs offer a holistic method of keeping students engaged in school while motivating them to fulfill eligibility requirements for their chosen career. Such programs consist of the three components described below.

DEFINITION

Youth career development is a subfield of workforce development. It serves disengaged youth—young people aged 14-24, who are not actively engaged in education, training, or the workforce. The goal is to help these youth return to school, enroll in post-secondary education or career training programs, or start a career. Programs in this field provide skills development, work experience, and youth development activities.

COMPONENTS OF THE RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Youth career development programs vary widely; SIR has found that high-quality career development programs have the following components:

- **Applied skills development** that provides youth with relevant academic, 21st century (soft), and job skills to improve their eligibility for employment or post-secondary education
- **Career exposure** that improves youth's understanding of career opportunities which can lead to a family-sustaining living wage
- **Youth development services** to help at-risk youth address and overcome their individual barriers to success

See our social issue report for more information on youth career development.

STEP 2 Evaluate the Program's Effectiveness through the Lens of the Recommended Approach

A. Evaluate the quality of applied skills development

Applied skills development services provide youth with career-relevant academic skills, 21st century skills, and job skills training that will help them succeed in future careers.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Provides contextualized opportunities to practice and improve basic academic skills
- ✓ Provides 21st century professional skills training (attendance, attire, time management, problem solving, etc.)
- ✓ Provides job skills and training to prepare participants for hands-on work experience
- ✓ Communicates to participants how the skills taught in the program can transfer to other careers

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Provides little or no support for youth in need of remedial literacy and/or numeracy skills improvement
- ✗ Provides little to no 21st century skills training, ad hoc if at all
- ✗ Provides some job skills in a classroom setting only (if at all), with no opportunity to apply them in a work experience
- ✗ Fails to communicate how job skills provided (if any) transfer to other careers

Examples of

EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Provides diploma or GED preparation

Provides a bridge to post-secondary education through assistance with exams and applications

Connects youth to training or certification programs related to their career interests

- ✓ Evaluates participants' skill development by observation or self-assessment during the program
- ✗ Does not evaluate the development of 21st century skills during the program

B. Evaluate the quality of career exposure

The career exposure services must provide meaningful work experience through internships, service learning, summer jobs, and/or work-based training, so that youth are equipped with valuable skills and experiences necessary for their entry into the labor market.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Provides opportunities to learn about careers that offer a living wage
- ✓ Provides opportunities for hands-on work experience at a work-site that includes the following characteristics:
 - Supervisor provides feedback and oversight
 - Attendance is required and youth are held accountable
 - Youth receive a regular wage or stipend

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Offers few to no opportunities to learn about careers that provide a living wage
- ✗ Offers work experience to some but not all youth; work-based experience includes the following characteristics:
 - Supervisor does not regularly provide oversight
 - Attendance at work is required but not enforced, or attendance is optional
 - Youth are unpaid



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Exposes youth to several careers in a variety of ways (speakers, job fairs, site visits)

Connects youth to training programs to achieve necessary credentials

Provides possibility for raises and awards for good performance at work-site

C. Evaluate the quality of youth development services

Youth development services provide at-risk youth with the help needed to address and overcome their individual barriers to success through a seamless integration of social services through in-house support and partnerships with other providers.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Staff proactively check in with youth and act as positive role models from whom youth can seek assistance
- ✓ Assesses social service needs at the beginning of the program and helps youth address challenges (e.g., transportation, family issues, school issues, healthcare needs, etc.)
- ✓ Works with youth to create individualized learning plans (ILP) that include short- and long-term goals
- ✓ Works with youth to develop exit plans to help them pursue their long-term goals
- ✓ Staff follow up with youth for at least one year after program completion, with at least one formal check-in

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Youth do not have the opportunity to connect consistently with a role model
- ✗ Does not assess social service needs; may offer referrals to youth who seek assistance
- ✗ Assists some youth to develop informal learning plans that may not be concrete
- ✗ May develop exit plans based on informal conversation with some youth, but not systematically for all youth
- ✗ Staff follow up with youth less than one year if at all; check-ins are infrequent



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Contracts with an outside mentoring program or facilitates on-going mentoring relationship during and after the program

Connects youth with the programs/institutions indicated in their exit plans

Has alumni program that keeps graduates of program engaged for the long-term

Collecting outcome data enables organizations to track long-term program effectiveness in improving the lives of their participants. High-performing organizations collect and analyze a wide variety of data to measure the effectiveness of their programs. Organizations use this data to build upon their successes and improve upon their weaknesses.

D. Evaluate outcomes and impact

Outcomes and impact of youth career development programs are difficult to measure because there is not one single desired outcome. The ultimate goal is that youth make a successful transition to adulthood and make a family-sustaining income. However, it is challenging for organizations to track these types of long-term outcomes. Therefore, at a minimum, organizations should track shorter-term outcomes such as re-engagement in school or completion of a GED program. Some organizations track longer-term outcomes, such as enrollment in post-secondary education or job-training programs, and full-time employment. Appropriate outcomes and measures of success will vary for each type of program and it is important for interested donors to have a conversation with organizations regarding how they track the success of their program as it relates to participant outcomes.

Below are some examples of short-term outcomes for which organizations may collect data.

| Outcome Measured | Indicators |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Re-engagement | Youth become re-engaged: return to or continue school, enroll in higher education or vocational school, take part in a job training program, or start a career |
| Reduction of risky behavior | Youth engagement in risky behavior such as criminal activity, substance abuse, and violence reduces significantly |
| Improvement of basic skills | Youth show significant improvement in basic skills necessary to succeed in school and the workplace |

Evaluating an organization's health and stability will provide insight into its structure, capacity, and ability to carry out its mission. It is important to consider at least two factors:

- A. Financial sustainability**, which describes an organization's ability to conduct its work in a fiscally responsible manner
- B. Management and governance**, which describes the leadership and oversight of the organization

STEP 3 Evaluate the Organization's Health and Stability

A. Evaluate financial sustainability

Financial sustainability describes an organization's ability to conduct its work in a fiscally responsible manner in the long term. The information below can be found on the organization's 990, an IRS form required of most nonprofits. It is best to review financial information over three to five years.

FINANCIALLY SUSTAINABLE

- ✓ Organization's debt-to-equity ratio is less than 1.5, meaning its debt is manageable given its assets
- ✓ Organization's current ratio is equal to or greater than one, meaning its assets are greater than its short-term debt
- ✓ Organization maintains three to six months in cash reserves, so it can withstand brief financial downturns
- ✓ Funding comes from a variety of sources, including government and philanthropy

FINANCIALLY UNSUSTAINABLE

- ✗ Debt-to-equity ratio is greater than 1.5; substantial amount of assets are directed to paying off debt
- ✗ Current ratio is less than one; the organization will continue to accumulate short-term debt as its assets are not enough to cover its debt
- ✗ Organization maintains fewer than three months in cash reserves, leaving it susceptible to economic shocks
- ✗ Funding is dominated by one source or type of funder

B. Evaluate management and governance

Management and governance indicators describe the capacity of staff and board to grow the organization and deliver on and hold themselves accountable to the mission.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ CEO has significant experience; management team members have good working relationship; staff are actively involved in the youth career development field, and have relationships with local employers; program staff have experience working with youth
- ✓ Board has five to seven members with diverse experience, including legal, management, financial, marketing, and fundraising; meets at least three times per year
- ✓ Planning shows evidence of measurable long-term and short-term goals

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Inexperienced CEO and management team, with no plans to build capacity; management team cannot convey program or model succinctly, has limited experience working with youth
- ✗ Board is comprised of individuals with similar—not diverse or complementary—skills and experience; meetings are rare; members play little or no role in fundraising, oversight, or planning
- ✗ Planning occurs ad hoc, for example, in an annual meeting where possible changes are discussed informally



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

CEO is an active leader in the field and management team brings extensive experience with issues faced by at-risk youth

Three to five year goal-driven planning with measurable indicators, concrete time frame, and industry analysis; various stakeholders engaged in the process, including former youth participants

There are many ways in which an organization can influence the field of youth career development. These include conducting impact and outcome research, providing consulting and training to other programs, and publicly advocating for policies relating to youth career development. SIR recommends considering three categories of activities:

- A. Growth plans**, which describe the organization's plans for the next three to five years
- B. Community partnerships**, which demonstrate the organization's ability to work collaboratively
- C. Field-building activities**, which show whether the organization is considering the big picture

STEP 4 Evaluate the Organization's Ability to Create Systemic Impact

A. Evaluate growth plans

Evaluate growth plans to understand the organization's capacity to further its mission and reach more people:

- Organization has a realistic growth plan with measurable goals and adequate funding to support growth
- Organization takes stakeholder input into consideration, such as input from youth participants, and partner organizations as it assesses its program

B. Evaluate community partnerships

Evaluate community partnerships to understand the organization's ability to collaborate and drive greater change:

- Organization continuously seeks to improve its network of partner organizations to better provide support services and create a sense of community for its youth
- Organization participates in boards, committees, and professional associations to exchange information about what works with peer organizations

C. Evaluate field-building activities

Evaluate field-building activities to understand the organization's role in driving systemic change:

- Organization, along with developing program-specific ideas, develops ideas on how to create cohesion in the field
- Organization shares lessons learned and best practices with other organizations actively working in the field by making data and research publicly available
- Organization regularly participates and sometimes takes a leadership role in advocating for systemic and policy changes to support youth career development

STEP 5 Interpret Your Evaluation and Determine How to Provide Support

The preceding four steps helped you gain a holistic understanding of an organization and its youth career development programs. To make a decision about the best way to provide support, determine where your organization fits among the following three categories:

- A. High-performing organizations** meet the majority of the criteria outlined above
- B. Developing organizations** meet some, but not all, of the criteria outlined above
- C. Low-performing organizations** meet few to none of the criteria outlined above

A. High-performing organizations

These organizations are running youth career development programs that focus on providing meaningful work experience and helping youth develop skills that are relevant and valuable to employers. They are financially sound with excellent leadership and governance. Donors can feel confident that an investment in such an organization will be used effectively.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Risk / Reward | Low risk/high reward |
| Recommended level of involvement | Low |
| Examples of investment opportunities | Continue running high-quality programs, help implement program growth plans, conduct research to build the field and provide evidence of what works, provide training to other organizations |

B. Developing organizations

These organizations may be doing some things well but need improvement in other areas. Often these are young organizations, but they can also be established organizations that are undergoing a transition. Investment in these organizations can be challenging yet exciting for donors who are interested in helping them improve.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Risk / Reward | Moderate risk/high reward |
| Recommended level of involvement | Medium to high |
| Examples of investment opportunities | Refine core programs to improve the quality of training and skill development, help organization improve its connections to partners providing employment, education and youth development services |

C. Low-performing organizations

These organizations have room for improvement in all areas. Investment in a low-performing organization with a good management team that is dedicated to improving its programs can be an exciting opportunity for donors who want to support organizational development. Investment in low-performing organizations that are not dedicated to improving is not recommended.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Risk / Reward | High risk/reward varies based on organization's desire to improve |
| Recommended level of involvement | High, if the organization is strategically working to improve |
| Examples of investment opportunities | Support strategic or business planning, secure technical assistance to improve programs, hire staff with significant expertise, help connect the organization with strong partners |

Supporting Emerging Social Innovations

HIGH RISK WITH THE POTENTIAL FOR HIGH REWARD

Donors may also wish to consider organizations that are testing innovative approaches that could eventually lead to breakthroughs in addressing the targeted social issues. Such organizations should be able to articulate why they are diverging from the proven approach and how they see themselves improving upon that approach. For youth career development programs, increasing the length of post-program support beyond one year is an example of emerging innovation. Extended support ensures that youth have a network of supportive services that lasts until their attainment of economic stability.

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Social Impact Research (SIR) is the independent research department of Root Cause, a research and consulting firm dedicated to mobilizing the nonprofit, public, and business sectors to work collaboratively in a new social impact market. Modeled after private sector equity research firms, SIR conducts research on social issues and independent analysis of program performance to provide leaders and funders with the rigorous, actionable information they need to make strategic decisions about creating and investing in social impact.



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