

Brief Overview of the Generation Work Interviews

Conducted with Young Adults Enrolled in the King County Reconnect to Opportunity Program

I. Introduction

SkillUp Washington, a workforce funder collaborative at the Seattle Foundation, is supporting local efforts to identify and share best practices for connecting young adults to good jobs and career pathways in King County. These efforts are supported in part through a multi-year initiative, Generation Work, which is part of a national effort funded by the Annie E Casey Foundation to increase access to good jobs and careers for young adults and connect employers to talent pipelines. King County's Employment and Education Resources program, a Generation Work partner, is supporting a county-wide outreach and referral strategy, Reconnect to Opportunity (ReOpp), to connect and refer young adults not working and not in school to education and employment programs. As part of Generation Work, SkillUp funded Business Government Community Connections (BGCC) to interview young adults referred by ReOpp about their career and educational aspirations and what local programs can do to better serve their needs.

As of September 1, 2017, eleven (11) young adults served by the ReOpp outreach and referral team responded to telephone interviews, ranging from 40 minutes to 115 minutes (averaging 58 minutes). Interviews were conducted at different times, including weekends and evenings (including 1:00 am) to accommodate different schedules and preferences of young adults.¹ Overall, young adults were appreciative of:

- The opportunity to work with ReOpp and referral partners;
- The chance to learn about and be connected to needed resources; and
- The gains (information, skills, access to resources and employment) they made as a result of these interventions.

Ten of the eleven interviews were conducted with young adults who were living in South King County, and one with a person who was living in San Francisco,

¹ The interview pool represented a small subset of the persons served by ReOpp. It has not been determined whether they are representative of the broader group of young adults enrolled in the program.

California but planning to return to King County in the near future. The majority (82%) of persons interviewed was persons of color, and 64% were female. Their ages ranged from 18-23 and 25% were single female head of households, all with children under 3 years of age.

The interviews were designed to engage each young adult in an interactive conversation in which they briefly shared stories about their past education and employment experiences prior to ReOpp. Young adults shared their impressions of ReOpp, as well as information about their hopefulness (using a modified version of the Hope Employment Scale) and readiness to move forward to reaching their career goals. For example, they gave a rating of 1-10 on their perception (with 1 being strongly disagree to 10 being strongly agree) to the statement, “I have the strength to overcome any obstacles when it comes to working.” The interviews were conversational, asset and solution-focused. Young adults were continually invited to identify educational persistence, employment and advising interventions that they felt were particularly effective or needed. All were informed that their names and personal information would be confidential, but their recommendations broadly shared. All were also given a gift card for their consulting role, and provided with the opportunity to include their technical assistance work on their resume. In addition, all were encouraged to use the consultant firm, BGCC, which conducted the interview as a job reference. To date, one young adult has taken advantage of this offer.

The programmatic-related comments of young adults are presented below.

II. Successful Advising Interventions

The ReOpp Generation Work Young Adult interviews underscored the value of ReOpp (and/or their referral partners) strategies to:

- ▶ support educational persistence and job search coaching methods which include opportunities for frequent check ins (formal and informal) with young adults, their peers, teachers and navigators where young adults can report on progress and voice concerns. *“Just knowing that others are interested in my progress, or are sharing my own challenges is helpful, and motivates me.”*
- ▶ engage young adults in out of classroom experiences, such as tours of companies, internships, visits to worksites, independent and guided research.

“Visiting the welder’s apprenticeship program made me realize that could be me.”

- ▶ introduce young adults to community resources that feature GED, childcare, and other resources that they may not have known about. *“When my advocate took me to see a program where my daughter could attend childcare the same time as I earn my GED, and I could see we were both going to be better off -I enrolled.”*

The progress self-reports also revealed that:

- ▶ Young adults (even those who are at the same age) progress at very different rates. Most, however, attributed setbacks or “stalls” in their progress to times when they were experiencing transitions in their lives that reduced their access to stable housing, benefits, transportation and/or childcare. This suggests that conversations and assessments of young adults should be frequent and ongoing, and continue post program (including after employment or training) to anticipate and address such transition issues. *“When I went to work, my income increased, and so did my housing costs, which I anticipated, but the fact that my childcare subsidy is soon ending is making me worry that I am going to go back to being unemployed.”* Young adult comments suggest that waiting to address such issues during structured check-in appointments is not sufficient.
- ▶ Young adults prefer having one primary case manager/coach/peer advocate, rather than repeating their “whole” story to different staff. Their experiences point to the potential benefits of team case management strategies that embed opportunities for information-sharing about young adult progress among team members, but reserve young adult time for forward-thinking discussions.
- ▶ Young adults said they wanted to receive guidance that is personal and customized, rather than “group” directives whenever possible. Most also preferred in person to telephone contact, admitting that transportation and scheduling constraints often made that impractical. Their comments suggest the benefits of place-based services in different locales, near where clients live.
- ▶ Efforts to *challenge and advise* young adults need to be carefully balanced and determined by looking at young adults’ cognitive and psychosocial maturity, and history of successfully applying these skills to earlier and other parts of their life. One young adult who did well in school, but had a great deal of anxiety about

looking for work, or leaving his home (even though it was a very stressful and unsupportive environment) said, *“Teachers and advocates need to know that just because someone does well in school does not mean they are able to succeed in other parts of their life. I am a good example of that. Always a good student, but beyond that arena not so much. No one has really talked to me about why I have returned to school so often, but not really done much with what I have learned.”*

The feedback young adults provided also indicated that it could be very helpful to:

- ▶ Integrate into interactions with young adults’ discussions about how they interpret and truly feel about: *their priorities, the future, and what they consider to be a risk or a reward*. The insights these discussions lead to could help shape action plans that clearly recognize and potentially stretch young adults’ views of independence and pursuit of goals. *“I basically want to work awhile, and then maybe go back to school for another class and keep trying to move ahead but my family keeps saying get more skills now – but classes get harder and harder and I feel more and more like I am living my parents or teachers goals and might just drop out.”*
- ▶ Incorporate into discussions with young adults, especially those who are involved with the juvenile justice system, discussions about risk, and resistance to peer influence, and how their perceptions of these issues could contribute to or threaten their success. *“It is so much more exciting to live on the edge. When I am not there I don’t feel I am really doing anything.”* The young adult who made this comment was in the county jail for a brief stay prior to the interview (and was identified as being there by the interviewer) by doing a review of jail roster names.

Given the above input, approaches for supporting young adults may want to utilize and embed team-focused, place-based coaching and case management strategies, just in time transition planning, assessments and interventions and personalized discussions with young adults about their future priorities, perceptions of risks and rewards. These combined efforts provide multilayered information to guide the development and ongoing implementation of education and career plans which have the right combination of challenge, support and guidance.

Successful Advising Strategies

Young Adults Want:

- Opportunities for Frequent Interactions With Peers, Teachers and Navigators
- Out of Classroom Exposure to Career and Community Resources
- Streamlined, Transition-Focused Assessment
- Customized rather than Group Guidance
- To be Challenged, Guided and Supported
- Action Plans which are Driven by their Perspectives regarding Risk, Rewards and Future Goals

IV. Hopefulness about the Future

On the Hope Employment Scale, which was administered by the interviewer a few months after most young adults enrolled in ReOpp, the majority (72%) of young adults agreed or strongly agreed that they were in the process of moving forward toward achieving their goals. Given the often extremely precarious circumstances many faced when they first enrolled in ReOpp, this data is promising. Almost two-thirds (63%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to utilize their skills to move toward their career goals. A deeper look at their comments show, however, that the focus on young adults next step career plans were inconsistent across provider systems. For example, some GED instructors helped young adults develop career plans, while others did not prioritize those types of services, which may make sense given their scope or charge, but not in terms of ensuring that young adults continue to progress towards achieving career goals.

Over half (54%) of young adults said they felt positive about how they will do in future jobs. Young adults attributed their relatively conservative ratings to concerns about their work skills (especially as compared to other workers who have more experience or a better education) and to their lack of housing, and cost of childcare, factors which young adults and employment research associate with employment instability.

V. Perceived Barriers to Employment

Young adult reports of perceived employment barriers in five (5) areas on a 31 item scale focusing on: physical and mental health, labor market exclusion, childcare, human capital, essential skills and resources revealed that the most frequently cited barriers included in order of frequency were:

- the lack of affordable housing:
- lack of connections to employers:
- lack of information about jobs; and
- lack of math/technical skills.

In addition, the three single parents all identified the high cost of childcare and need to care for young children as their top two barriers.

Re Opp and their referral partners helped to begin addressing some of these barriers. ReOpp referrals contributed to the education and employment outcomes of some young adults, as shown below.

VI. Re Opp Outcomes

Eight (8) of the eleven (11) young adults reported that ReOpp services helped them to have more information about jobs.

Five (5) said they earned GED's because of ReOpp referrals, and as such had improved their academic skills, including math and technical skills.

Three (3) had found jobs, due to a combination of Youth Source resources and their own independent job search. One (1) young adult said she would not have been hired if she had not received a GED through a ReOpp referral, as this was a minimum requirement of the company where she worked.

Two (2) young adults said that although they had not followed up on any referrals that the information they received was useful, and may inform their decisions to access services in the future.

Young adults also received a total of forty (40) different referrals, and nine (9) young adults accessed a total of 20 services.² Housing was the most difficult

² It is likely that more referrals were made as self-reports are based on young adult recall, and they may tend to remember those referrals that were more pertinent to their needs.

resource to find, and as one young adult, who had repeatedly been homeless or couch surfing, said, “Essential to my being able to get or stay in a job.”

The three main reasons for not accessing services included, in order of frequency, lack of follow through on the part of the young adult, lack of time, and lack of transportation. Notably, referral (maker and receiver) partners who took the initiative to contact the young adult on multiple occasions to engage them in services were *4.5 times more likely* to result in the young adult accessing assistance than if the young adult received no further encouragement.

Type of Referral	Referred	Accessed and Utilized
Housing	7	2
GED	7	5
Employment Assistance (Youth Source, Pacific Associates, Pioneer Human Services)	5	3
Apprenticeship	3	0 (1 in process)
Utility Assistance	2	0
Childcare	3	3
TANF/BFET	2	2
Financial Aid	4	2
Other programs (Year Up, Job Corps, Youth Care, YWCA, Fare Start)	7	3