



# Young Adult Talent Development:

How to Keep the Momentum Going During COVID-19

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## At a Glance

This brief shares lessons about sustaining young adult talent development efforts amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, a collapsing economy, and reexamination of the work in light of the rekindled Black Lives Matter movement. The insights came from both young adults and practitioners in the Young Adult Talent Development Network.

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## Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has been devastating to countless Americans, particularly people of color and those with low incomes. Young people from these communities have been especially hard hit. Some of these 18-to-24-year-olds are juggling part-time frontline jobs, school, and increased care responsibilities at home. Not surprisingly, many are feeling despair about their futures, and with good reason: they have experienced among the highest rates of job and income loss, which has exacerbated existing inequalities.<sup>1</sup>

The work of organizations that foster young adult talent development, with a particular focus on youth of color and those from low-income communities, is more important than ever. But with the new normal comes an array of daunting challenges:

- How do these nonprofits deliver high-quality supportive services, education, and job training remotely?
- How do organizations that are high-touch and very personalized in their approaches keep members engaged amid so many competing priorities and distractions?
- Finally, how can nonprofits integrate the country's renewed reckoning with racial injustice into their programming?

This brief shares how one network of young adult leaders and youth-focused workforce development organizations have met the challenges—responding first to the worldwide health crisis and a collapsing economy, and then, reexamining their work in light of the rekindling of the Black Lives Matter movement. These insights and lessons learned emerged from online interactions among members of JFF's Young Adult Talent Development (YATD) Network (*see appendix for a list of member organizations*).

The work began with several informal virtual coffee hours for network members to share how they were supporting young people and coping with ongoing and emerging crises. These gatherings were followed by a survey, phone interviews, and a virtual focus group of young people. This report distills and analyzes these conversations, outlining the issues that young people and network members grappled with during the initial months of the trio of crises—the pandemic, its economic fallout, and racial unrest. It also details how, as summer arrived, field leaders began focusing on longer-term strategies, with an eye toward seizing new opportunities amid the upheaval.

## Operating in Crisis Mode: March-May 2020

As stay-at-home orders went into effect across the country, YATD network members had to quickly shift delivery models from in-person to online. They had to secure and distribute technology resources to participants, including connectivity solutions for an unexpected number of participants with internet access issues. Network members also grappled with how to retain critical aspects of their personalized, relationship-based culture while delivering their programs virtually.

### *Transitioning to remote program delivery*

Organizational leaders and staff had to quickly shift from in-person to virtual program delivery. In order to continue providing their most vital services—relationship building, skills and competencies development, and wraparound supports—leaders identified and implemented e-learning software and other virtual platforms. They trained staff to deliver services in new ways and onboarded participants to the technology. They also queried staff members about which strategies were and weren't working and identified technical and instructional areas that required improvement. By May 2020, many organizations had completed an initial launch of online service delivery.

### *Identifying employment opportunities*

Many young adults lost their jobs during the first wave of business closings. In response, network organizations increased their work with local employers to identify job openings, utilizing referral networks to quickly share information about available positions to a more dispersed and harder to reach client population. However, the jobs were often in essential, frontline positions, so network members were ambivalent about making referrals, especially when personal protective equipment was scarce. To help ensure young people could work safely, members requested employer safety policies before participant placement, developed standards for which employers they would partner with to ensure safety, and educated young people about safety precautions such as social distancing and frequent handwashing.

### *Connecting young adults to resources*

For participants facing myriad challenges, including housing instability, food insecurity, and medical and mental health needs, network members found new ways to build awareness of and connect young people to resources. They compiled and disseminated resource lists which included food distribution sites, legal aid, and mental health services. Organizations also educated themselves about federal and state resources, including the federal stimulus package and unemployment benefits. Some provided participants with virtual coaching and informational videos on topics such as applying for unemployment. Recognizing that the need

for access to mental health services was heightened by the strains of the pandemic, staff members conducted frequent well-being checks with participants via phone or online.

### *Pursuing the Dream of College During a Pandemic*

Just a month before stay-at-home orders went into effect, Tulane University's Cowen Institute launched Trellis, a program that helps participants enroll in and persist through Southern New Hampshire University online degree programs. In its original hybrid design, Trellis would provide space and technology for participants to access online courses, while delivering advising in person. Once stay-at-home orders went in effect, Trellis staff addressed connectivity issues and delivered technology such as laptops to participants as needed. Staff transitioned in-person support services to virtual advising and counseling using Zoom.

## **Preparing for the Long Haul: May-June 2020**

By May, as it became clear that a pandemic endpoint was not in sight, organizations in the Young Adult Talent Development Network began to consider how a prolonged reliance on virtual environments might permanently reshape the field as well as opportunities for young people. Practitioners began experiencing the erosion of critical partnerships and pathway infrastructure. For example, access to training equipment in lab spaces was indefinitely suspended or open with limited capacity to honor safety precautions. And YATD leaders found it challenging to engage with education and employer partners as they struggled to address issues and uncertainty within their own institutions. But they persisted, working to understand the changes outside their organizations while adjusting their own strategies to stabilize supports, pathways, and opportunities for their participants.

### *Planning for long-term sustainability*

Like for-profit businesses, YATD organizations faced prolonged disruptions to essential funding streams. Leaders had to make difficult decisions that would allow their organizations to continue serving as many participants as possible yet survive financially. Some placed program segments on indefinite hold and were forced to lay off or furlough staff. Network members utilized federal resources such as Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans to keep staff on the payroll and worked with funders to ease restrictions on their charitable giving in order to support general operations.

### ***Increasing efforts to address racial inequities and social justice***

A national spotlight on racial injustice re-energized organizations' and young leaders' commitments to racial justice, inspiring them to more fully embed equity and justice in their programs. Strategies to address racial justice took the following forms:

- Delivering training to staff on racial sensitivity and trauma-informed practices
- Including young adults in program planning meetings so their perspectives would inform new programming
- Facilitating forums for young people to discuss workplace bias and the effects of racism on employment and training
- Delivering unconscious bias training to employer partners
- Being more explicit about organizational commitments to racial equity and social justice and developing partnerships with companies and education institutions that recognize the importance of this mission.
- Creating documents informing young people of their civil and legal rights

Many YATD network members already included social justice curricula in their offerings, but believed it important to expand these resources in light of the explosion of protests and unrest.

**“Racial equity has always been a cornerstone of our program training; we focus on employers that foster an environment of inclusion and diversity in the workplace.”** – Dennis Bagneris, Liberty’s Kitchen

**“We are currently building a youth online engagement program and as a part of that program, youth will learn about civic engagement, racial justice, and social justice.”**– Terry Green, Think Make Live Youth

### ***Understanding and recalibrating for the new employment landscape***

Network members recognized the importance of understanding the new workforce and economic landscape. By conducting outreach to employer partners, sometimes daily, organizations assessed their changing needs and gauged their re-hiring timelines. Employers said that for the near future, new hires would be trained to work remotely. Some employers also were mulling over reducing degree requirements for certain jobs.

Network members used this information and sector-specific data to launch trainings to prepare young adults for remote work, emphasizing soft skills development. Network members also advised participants on industry-recognized credentials that would help them secure in-person jobs once those positions return.

### ***Soft skills for remote work***

Young Adult Talent Development Network leaders created a list of top skills needed for success in remote learning and employment. These skills will be permanently incorporated into organizations' training programs, given the expectation that post-pandemic, many jobs will remain remote.

- Self-motivation
- Communication
- Time management
- Flexibility
- Creativity
- Critical thinking
- Digital literacy
- Emotional intelligence

### ***Repurposing the Lunch Hour for Career Exploration***

YATD member organizations have been creating opportunities for employers to connect virtually with young people. One example is Hopeworks Camden's Chat and Chews, a career exploration program that has traditionally taken place in person. The lunch hour conversations, where employer partners share insights into company culture, hiring practices, and industry trends, are now happening online and continue to be very popular. Virtual delivery of the career exploration events have also increased access to professionals located in different cities who may not have been able to otherwise make arrangements for in-person engagement.

## Keeping the Momentum Going: July-August 2020

YATD organizations worried about being able to recruit new participants and maintain connections with existing ones. Some nonprofits had to reexamine their belief that in-person interaction is the only way to do these things and found innovative alternatives

By mid-summer, most network members reported ramping up outreach to participants in multiple ways: phone calls, texts, and video conferences. To support participants' socio-emotional needs, organizations turned to some novel solutions, including online healing circles, when participants meet on Zoom calls to talk with their peers and engage in activities such as journaling to boost their mental and emotional well-being. Some organizations encouraged young people to create video diaries through which participants record rather than write responses to prompts or freely describe the events of their day and their feelings. Other organizations hosted virtual sessions that integrated journaling with discussions of the current state of the country. The outreach served the dual purpose of keeping the young people engaged while eliciting information to inform program decisions.

Recruitment depended heavily on social media and virtual communications. Programs such as The Door, a Bronx, NY-based youth center, began hosting online open houses. Some network members noted that these virtual events increased access by making it easier for people to attend. In some cases network members also reassessed and in some cases reduced entry requirements for training programs. Strategies such as these appeared to have a positive impact on candidate conversion rates: despite receiving lower numbers of applications, some programs experienced less attrition between the application, acceptance, and enrollment phases of recruitment.

### *Gathering and Using Data*

Skills for Chicagoland's Future, a nonprofit that connects companies with unemployed and underemployed jobseekers, regularly checks in on participants, querying them about their ability to learn or work remotely. By acquiring participant-level data on the accessibility of laptops or quiet spaces, the program was better able to advocate for and dispatch resources to individuals. This data was also used to develop training for participants to prepare for and succeed in virtual experiences.

### ***Taking Social Media Marketing to the Next Level***

Tulane University's Cowen Institute leveraged social media analytics to build a marketing strategy. Using A/B testing—creating two versions of a website landing page to see which one is more effective—and engagement data, the organization identified new target audiences and crafted Facebook and Instagram ads. The Cowen Institute also used local New Orleans social media influencers to build awareness of its programs and connect with young people.

### ***Training and credentialing virtually***

With training centers closed or limiting the number of students onsite, network members began exploring alternative ways to deliver technical skills training. Some explored virtual reality tools to simulate work-based training experiences. Network members also worked to integrate instructional programming that would boost the development of skills and competencies for remote work and future work experiences. Practitioners implemented modularized instruction by breaking up lessons into smaller “chunks” to reduce online learning fatigue. They also integrated credentialing programs, such as Occupational Safety and Health Administration training, that offered preparation and test-taking services online.

### ***Identifying the most resilient industries***

The pandemic has made YATD organizations rethink the relative resiliency of different careers. Health care, construction, and information technology have continued to employ young adults in contrast to hospitality and food service. The following sectors and occupations have been identified as the most resilient career pathways for young people:

- Transportation, distribution, and logistics
  - Supply chain specialists
  - Truck drivers
- Healthcare
  - Registered nurses
  - Physician assistants
  - Nurse practitioners
  - Behavioral technicians
  - Contact tracers
- Information technology
  - Remote network support specialists
  - Cloud support specialists
  - Cybersecurity analysts

- Business services
  - Customer service representatives
- Green jobs
  - Coastal restoration managers
- Facilities management
  - Facilities engineers

### *Using Space Differently*

Like other network partners, Taller San Jose Hope Builders faced the challenge of serving participants whose home environments were not conducive to e-learning. The nonprofit began reimagining how to use its offices that now sat dormant while staff worked from home. Leadership came up with the idea of using the spaces as a learning center and participants are now accessing training, searching for jobs, and studying there.

## Looking Forward

A robust and equitable economic recovery depends on young adults reaching their full potential and becoming employees, entrepreneurs, and engaged community members. Despite the formidable challenges the pandemic has presented, youth-facing community-based organizations are persevering, responding with creativity and nimbleness.

As practitioners continue to adapt and innovate, the following principles and questions must be top of mind:

***All decision-making must place young adults at the center.*** How do we ensure that program designs and services are informed by the young people they serve?

***Policy-making and collective advocacy are critical next steps.*** How can organizations push for and contribute to creative thinking and action at city, county, and state policy levels?

***Young adults are central to an equitable recovery.*** How might the young adult talent development field make the case to employers for prioritizing young adults, especially young adults of color, who are competing with jobseekers with more work experience?

A second brief (forthcoming in December 2020) elaborates on how the information sharing of the early spring and summer helped to shape a late-summer series of innovation sessions, using human-centered design to tackle the tough challenges ahead.

## APPENDIX: Young Adult Talent Development Network, Member Organizations

Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions

Bay Area Community Resources

Boys and Girls Club of America

Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program

Catalyst Kitchens

Center for Employment Opportunities

Cowen Institute

Cristo Rey Network

District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund

FareStart

Goodwill Industries International, Inc.

Grads of Life

Hope Builders

Hopeworks Camden

International Youth Foundation

JEVS Human Services

Jobs for America's Graduates

Juma Ventures

Liberty's Kitchen

NAF (formerly National Academy Foundation)

National Youth Employment Coalition

NPower

Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow

Per Scholas

Resilient Coders

Safer Foundation

Seedco

Skills for Chicagoland's Future

STRIVE

The Center for Law and Social Policy

The Door

Think Make Live

Urban Alliance

Year Up

Youth Empowerment Project

YouthBuild USA

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<sup>1</sup> *Rocked by COVID-19, Young People’s Uncertainties Over Future Could Shape Economic Outlook for an Entire Generation* (Seattle, WA: Equitable Futures: A Project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, September 2020), <https://www.equitablefutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Equitable-Futures-COVID-19-Youth-Tracking-Poll-Findings-Brief-Sep-2020.pdf>; Mark Hugo Lopez, Lee Rainie, Abby Budiman, *Financial and Health Impacts of COVID-19 Vary Widely by Race and Ethnicity*, (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/>.