**Cultural Networking: How Low-Income Youth Access Labor and Community Resources Through NYC Employment Programs**

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**Abstract**

Without early access to social connections or knowledge of culturally-relevant practices, low-income young people are left behind in the race towards increased mobility. This study examines one of the solutions to this challenge—youth employment programs. Specifically, I use the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development programs as a case study. I interview twelve program participants and staff members to explore how such programs can equip low-income young people with the skills to not only succeed in the workforce, but also in their schools and communities. I ground my findings in social and cultural capital theory, examining how the DYCD programs can increase these capital gains and benefit young people throughout the program and beyond.

I find that these programs encourage exposure to adults who can guide participants through abstract, implicitly-learned practices such as networking and professional etiquette. Moreover, these young people develop trust-driven relationships composed of mentors and similar others. These communities empower them to incorporate their learnings into their own identities, fashioning unique understandings of their world and themselves. I identify several challenges, including the chance-based lottery system, lack of diversity, number-driven evaluations, and insufficient mental health services. Ultimately, I recommend that policies must garner greater support from employers, maintain constant lines of communication between providers and schools, and above all, prioritize individual participant needs.

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# Introduction

A cursory look at the United States job market reveals nuanced, puzzling systems of behavior that are seldom taught explicitly. Networking, interviews, and cover letters are regulated by rules of “proper” business etiquette, as defined by those possessing institutional power. Early on, young people from high-income families are often exposed to individuals, such as relatives, parents’ friends, and mentors, with a proven track record of professional excellence. These individuals can serve as guiding figures, paving similar paths of success for young people within their closed networks.

Compared to youth from higher-income families, those from low-income families often lack the necessary resources to navigate the job market. The latter are often not equally exposed to individuals who can readily transmit knowledge of professional behavior and processes, i.e. cultural capital. Lacking such figures, the ability of these young people to form additional ties, expand their network, and increase their social capital is severely limited.

Moreover, many disadvantaged young people are “working on [their] own and [their] friends can't even understand [them]” (Katie, personal communication, January 31, 2020). Whether they are the first in their family to graduate high school or have recently immigrated from another country, they enter the job market with diverse, sometimes misunderstood life experiences. Without trusted, supportive communities, they are left feeling isolated, not knowing how to begin reaching out for help.

In response to this disparity, many federal and local governments have initiated policies to boost low-income youths’ workforce chances by providing them with early employment services. In New York City, the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) has leveraged such an approach, offering six programs that each vary slightly in their specific youth target group. As low-income young people often juggle multiple challenges, these programs equip participants with not only job-related skills, but also opportunities in mentorship and social development.

Using programs initiated by the NYC DYCD as a case study, I answer the following research questions: What are the impacts of youth employment programs on low-income participants’ access to networks and opportunities, both within the labor market and beyond? How can these programs be improved to better serve their participants?

By drawing greater attention to these youth employment programs, this project informs how they not only impact low-income participants’ financial stability, but also their learnings and perceptions of the world around them. As a result of their age and vulnerable socio-economic status, these participants are often overlooked, which only further undermines their ability to obtain the financial and social resources that they deserve. This project’s analysis of these programs is just one step towards empowering these youth to independently and confidently enter higher education, the workforce, and beyond.

# Background

Across the United States, 2.1 million youth aged 16 to 24 are unemployed, despite taking active steps to locate employment in the last four weeks (U.S. Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Without a steady source of income, they are often in tight, challenging financial situations. As evident across a multitude of studies, money does not only impact what one can buy, but also where and how one can live (Ludwig et al., 2013). The variables influenced by income include neighborhood climate, crime rates, and mental and physical health. One’s environment has the power to either expose or hinder one from opportunities for personal growth and success. For low-income youth, these experiences largely impact their future decisions.

While many of these individuals are enrolled in schools, a large portion of them are not. In fact, 4.5 million young people aged 16 to 24 are neither employed nor in school (Lewis, 2019). Without these academic institutions, whether it be a traditional high school or college, online classes, or a number of alternative programs, these young people are unable to obtain credentials that have been deemed necessary for many part- and full-time jobs. Apart from certificates or diplomas, academic institutions also provide students with a plethora of resources, ranging from career counseling to mentor health support. Coupled with their lack of financial resources, these youth are left without valuable information outlets, guiding adults, and supportive communities that can assist them as they grow and develop into adulthood.

## Youth employment programs

To combat youth unemployment, government agencies have initiated a wide variety of federal and local youth employment programs. I first provide an overview of the federal programs to review the extent of the issue and the solutions that larger government agencies have developed. Then, I hone in on local programs, many of which receive some funding from federal directives. I begin with NYC, then explore similar programs in other cities across the United States.

### Federal programs

At the federal level, the United States Department of Labor has established the following programs: Registered Apprenticeship, Job Corps, YouthBuild, and Youth Connections. The first Registered Apprenticeship system can be traced back to 1911, and now spans industries such as manufacturing, construction, health care, and energy conservation (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Job Corps provides a slightly more comprehensive model, empowering young people aged 16 to 24 with housing, basic health care, technical career training, high school diploma assistance, and additional support services to launch them into either a job, higher education, or the military (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). YouthBuild engages low-income, out-of-school youth aged 16 to 24 in high school diploma classes, affordable housing building projects, and mentorships (YouthBuild, n.d.). Most recently, Youth Connections, enacted by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, established state funding for the development and delivery of comprehensive youth employment programs for at-risk, out-of-school and in-school youth (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Such services include leadership development, internships or work experiences, financial literacy trainings, and mentorships.

### Local programs

NYC’s DYCD utilizes a multi-faceted, comprehensive approach to target the needs of various young people. The department has six youth employment programs: Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), Ladders for Leaders, Learn and Earn, Advance and Earn, Train and Earn, and Work, Learn and Grow (WLG). In the table below, I detail the specifics of each program.

Table 1: DYCD Program Descriptions

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Qualifications** | **Duration** | **Services included** | **Application process** |
| **SYEP** | Ages 14-24 | July-Aug | Work readiness, higher education preparation, summer jobs | Lottery system |
| **Ladders for Leaders** | High school/college students aged 16-22 with previous work experience | July-Aug | Summer internships, alumni networks, career exploration and readiness | Selection process: short essay, transcript, resume |
| **Learn and Earn** | Low-income HS juniors and seniors aged 16-21 | Year-round | Academic support, service learning, work readiness, summer internships | Lottery system |
| **Advance and Earn** | Out-of-school youth aged 16-24 | Sep-Jan; Feb-June | HSE exam preparation, certifications, training, internships | Dependent on provider |
| **Train and Earn** | Low-income, out-of-school youth aged 17-24 | Year-round | Work readiness, workforce training, HSE services, internships | Dependent on provider |
| **Work, Learn and Grow** | Past SYEP participants, in-school, aged 16-21 | Oct-Mar | Career readiness, training internships | Lottery system |

*Information gathered from NYC DYCD* (2020)

Each program is differentiated by its youth targeting, duration, and objectives. For instance, SYEP’s primary goal is to place youth in entry-level summer jobs, while Ladders for Leaders offers more structured, selective internships. WLG builds off SYEP by offering past-SYEP participants the opportunity to participate in more training and employment throughout the school year (NYC DYCD, n.d.). Both Train and Earn and Learn and Earn run year-round, but the former recruits youth who are out-of-school, while the latter serves high school students who are at-risk for dropping out. Lastly, Advance and Earn helps out-of-school youth secure long-term jobs or enroll in post-secondary education by offering High School Equivalency (HSE) test preparation, certifications, and internships.

Since the number of interested DYCD participants far exceeds the number of available spots, many of the programs employ a lottery-based system. Participants apply in the months leading up to the program and are chosen at random based on the capacity of their selected provider. Providers are community-based organizations, such as social advocacy agencies and community colleges, who recruit employers, train participants, and facilitate the job placement process (Valentine, 2017). Providers, and subsequently jobs or internships, are located in all five boroughs across NYC.

The DYCD programs are not the only ones of their kind. Similar government-funded youth employment programs are offered in many cities across the United States such as Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Charlotte, and Philadelphia. These programs are similar to those within NYC, in that they partner with community organizations and recruit youth across the respective city. In addition, these programs all feature both a job or internship component and a workshop series component. For example, the Seattle Youth Employment Program includes weekly meetings that cover team-building activities, one-on-one coaching, and career discovery (City of Seattle, n.d.). One notable difference is that while NYC has a range of programs throughout the year, many of these cities have programs that only run in the summer. Thus, the DYCD programs are notable in both their scope and scale—they serve an enormous population while offering tailored models for each youth group.

# Literature Review

I begin this section with a summary of the existing scholarship on social and cultural capital to position my studied population and research questions within this context. Then, I briefly describe my population of interest, low-income young people, drawing from studies that examine their characteristics. I apply the theories of social and cultural capital to my population, discussing how their circumstances impact their ability to access and mobilize social and cultural capital. I connect these findings to literature on afterschool and extra-curricular activities, describing their insufficiencies. Finally, I unite the preceding sections with youth employment programs, ending with a discussion on how my project offers additional information into these aforementioned fields of literature.

## Social capital: relationships, networks, and the resources within

Many theorists agree on three essential aspects of social capital: form, i.e. the structural elements of relationships; norms of obligation and reciprocity, i.e. expectations of return due to trust; and resources, i.e. access to information, money, and additional connections (McNeal, 1999; Monkman et al., 2005). Similarly, Bourdieu (1986, pg. 21) defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” In essence, social capital exists in the benefits embedded in one’s membership within a group of mutually recognized and established actors. Membership within a network is a necessary precursor for obtaining social capital, but these two are not identical (Lin, 2008; Burt, 2002). Networks of different form generate different types of social capital; those with strong closure in which relationships are highly intertwined are able to exchange information at a quick and efficient rate, while sparse networks facilitate access to more diverse sets of information (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 2002).

While networks operate with different levels of closure, a key element to the foundation of all networks, the resources within, and ultimately social capital, is that they are only legitimate when there exists a degree of collective group investment. As Coleman (1988) notes, with increased interactions, actors within social networks develop mutual understandings of trust, normative practices, and information that help guide their behaviors. Increased interactions result in more knowledge, thereby reinforcing one’s membership and degree of trust within their group. Social relationships cannot flourish with little effort—they are the product of individual and group-led initiatives to maintain and reproduce these ties.

More recently, Lin (2017) outlined this network-based theory of social capital, in which one’s social capital allows one to access and mobilize resources from trusted others. Lin outlines four processes through which the benefits of social capital manifests. First, social capital galvanizes the transmission of information, eliminating barriers for group members to access information that they otherwise may not. Second, social ties may influence the decisions that agents make about actors and which types of resources will be extended. Third, group membership may warrant an individual certain “credentials” that enable them to navigate the group’s resources. Lastly, network ties and the embedded resources reinforce one’s membership in the group to oneself and those outside of the group, providing support and safety for the group member.

## Cultural capital: institutional knowledge, norms, and expectations

Cultural capital is largely cited as the knowledge of the workings and norms that govern an institution (Bourdieu, 1986). Moreover, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital can exist in three states: the embodied state, i.e. dispositions of the mind that formulate one’s “habitus”*;* the objectified state, i.e. objects and media such as monuments and paintings; and the institutionalized state, i.e. the embodiment of cultural capital into qualifications and certificates such as diplomas.

Notably, elements of the embodied state, which Bourdieu deems as the most important, cannot be transmitted instantaneously; they are actualized through learned experiences and are “linked in numerous ways to [a] person” (Bourdieu, 1986, pg. 18). In essence, an individual’s habitus governs how they view and act in the world (Dumais, 2006). The objectified state and the institutionalized state may be transmitted materially, but not symbolically. In order to appropriately and correctly use culturally-relevant material goods, one must possess the corresponding cultural capital. For example, an individual can possess a college diploma, but without the relevant jargon and understandings of college experiences, the diploma is devoid of legitimate cultural capital.

Cultural capital exists and pertains to a specific institution at a specific time period, as a given situation may warrant a different norm than another. For instance, how one acts, dresses, and speaks differs between social and professional settings. Moreover, researchers have differed between high- and low-status cultural symbols, depending on the specific time period (DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; Kaufman and Gabler, 2004; Lamont and Lareau, 1988). A high-school degree was seen as a more coveted, high-status cultural good in the early 20th century, but in the current day, higher education has overtaken high school as the sought-after, high-status good.

## The inextricable link between social and cultural capital

Social and cultural capital necessitate the existence of the other, as accumulation of one facilitates accumulation of the other (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Social networks enable individuals to communicate resources, i.e. cultural knowledge, and cultural capital allows individuals to demonstrate their belonging in a group, i.e. social capital, by exhibiting certain behaviors and dispositions. For example, the friends of one’s parents can act as sources of social capital through which one can obtain cultural capital, such as knowledge on professional etiquette. In turn, one can employ this professional etiquette to build their professional network, establishing new connections and strengthening their social capital.

## Low-income youth and young adults

In the United States, 41% of all youth under the age of 18 and 44% of young adults aged 21 to 26 are low-income (Koball and Jiang, 2018; The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). These low-income young people are more likely to experience lower rates of academic success, access to mental and physical health resources, and economic stability, compared to their higher-income peers (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997; Jordan, Mireles, and Popkin, 2013). In addition, research on neighborhood effects has shown that low-income young people often live in neighborhoods that are negatively impacted by crime and violence. Combined with findings that this population is 50% more likely than their higher-income counterparts to have moved in the past year, instability within these individuals’ environments further endangers their future outcomes (Koball and Jiang, 2018).

As a result of these adverse experiences, low-income young people are less likely to complete high school or obtain a GED and later attend college. As early experiences have the potential to pave the path for future life trajectories, this population of vulnerable youth represents a crucial priority for public policy research and support.

## Social and cultural capital applied to low-income young people

The unfavorable outcomes of low-income young people may be explained by their lower levels of social and cultural capital, compared to their higher-income peers. I first describe two prominent factors that play a role in this lower degree of social and cultural capital: neighborhood effects and family background. Then, I combine these findings and review a broader field of scholarship that examines how knowledgeable adults build trust-driven, welcoming communities for young people to extend their network and enjoy the benefits within.

### Neighborhood effects

Low-income young people are more likely to live in unstable communities where residents lack consistent housing and may eventually move out. Thus, they are less likely to establish and maintain ties with non-familial individuals who can expose them to avenues of information beyond what is available to them through their parents. In their study of low-income neighborhoods, Brisson and Usher (2005) found that home ownership rates are associated with bonding social capital. These results suggest that low-income neighborhoods where most residents are renters offer less social capital than higher-income neighborhoods where residents are more likely to be homeowners. As home ownership involves a social and financial commitment to the community, this personal and collective investment strengthens trust and bonds between members. Similarly, in their examination of Chicago neighborhoods, Lochner et al. (2003) found that neighborhood social capital, measured by elements such as reciprocity and trust, was correlated with lower death rates. This community social capital has also been linked to removing barriers to health care (Perry et al., 2008).

Extending these findings to neighborhood schools, Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2001) found that Texas public school teachers who move between urban schools tend to prefer those with high achieving, non-minority, and non-low-income students. As a result, low-achieving schools see a lower teacher retention rate (less than 75%), compared to high-achieving schools (more than 80%). Low-income youth are thus particularly vulnerable to experiencing a revolving door of teachers within their schools, and only 44% of these youth remain consistently connected to school and/or the labor market (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2009).

In addition, disadvantaged neighborhoods often lack access to safe public spaces where youth can interact with others, develop their socio-emotional skills, and refine their confidence in themselves. Taken together, this evidence suggests that the environments of these individuals further restrict their opportunities to make meaningful, long-lasting connections with others and harness the benefits of social and cultural capital.

### Family background

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) demonstrated that parental encouragement has a twofold effect—parents can set high expectations for their children as well as become proactive actors in their children’s schooling. It is not that low-income parents do not want to be involved in their children’s schooling and careers, but rather they may not have the time or resources to do so. Parents who did not participate in post-secondary education may be less informed about the nuances of their children’s schools and the strategies to advocate for them. This absence of parent-driven capital is evident in findings showing that among students with college-educated parents, 71% enroll in a four year institution, compared to only 26% of those whose parents do not have more than a high school diploma (Perna and Swail, 2001). As parents’ experiences can help young people navigate schooling and the labor market, low-income youth are less likely to be provided with background on preparing for college, financial aid, and future jobs.

Beyond institutional know-how (i.e. cultural capital), the degree of community connectivity (i.e. social capital) felt by parents can be linked to a range of child outcomes. For instance, Furstenberg and Hughes (1995) found that received maternal support, the number of child’s friends that the mother knows, and the strength of the mother’s help network are positively linked to rates of adult employment and negatively linked to criminal activity. Parents who feel a larger sense of community belonging generate more connections, opening up sources of potential opportunities for their children (McNeal, 1999). Through introducing their children to these connections, these parents expand their children’s pool of knowledgeable figures as well as their grasp on valuable cultural information.

### The role of knowledgeable adults as cultural guides

Overall, this absence of salient role models, parents or otherwise, who understand the worlds of postsecondary education and career information has the potential to threaten the opportunities of low-income young people (Hooker and Brand, 2010). Without access to college-educated adults, young people are less likely to enroll in college and have less robust understandings of possible post-secondary options and job-specific requirements (Sommerfeld and Bowen, 2013). Hoxby and Turner (2015) found that low-income, high-achieving students often do not apply to selective schools because they do not believe they can afford to attend. They are often unaware of financial aid that may render selective schools more affordable than less selective schools, although the latter may have a lower sticker price. However, informational programming has shown to increase application and enrollment rates to selective schools among low-income populations, thereby suggesting the potential for interventions to be both practical and beneficial.

Knowledgeable adults are also able to expose youth to “soft” skills that may assist them in in their social-emotional growth. Sommerfeld and Bowen (2013) showed that those possessing more connections with college-educated adults are more likely to exhibit persistence when engaging in networking and mentorship. Moreover, middle class young adults display a greater sense of entitlement and comfort when seeking help, compared to their working-class and poor counterparts (Lareau, 2015).

Many of the processes through which individuals mobilize social and cultural capital exist in pivotal yet “invisible” ways. Borrowing an example from the job search process, when an individual submits an application to a company, they may know someone internally who can vouch for their accolades. This has the potential to increase their hiring rate, even if this “behind-the-scenes” interaction is unbeknownst to the individual. Young people who are embedded in mutually respectful and cooperative relationships are better able to access, and subsequently harness, the power of resources within those relationships.

There exists a general consensus in the literature that cultural capital begins at birth, stemming initially from social class differences then developing over time depending on the inputs and experiences in an individual’s life (Dumais, 2006; Bourdieu, 1986). Accordingly, Bourdieu (1986, pg. 19) states that the “transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, and it therefore receives proportionately greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies.” As individuals are born into particular socioeconomic classes, this classification has the potential to mold their habitus, impacting how they view the world. As such, it is even more important for individuals to provide unwavering support for young people in an effort to end this cycle of social stratification.

## Afterschool and extracurricular programs

One potential source of social and cultural capital lies in afterschool and extracurricular programs. These programs, usually held in schools or community centers, expose young people to mentors, healthy peer relationships, and interests or hobbies. Studies have found that extracurricular programs are linked to greater academic achievement, social development, and higher rates of high school competition (White and Gager, 2007). A study by Broh (2002) demonstrated that extracurriculars can connect youth with adults such as teachers and friends’ parents. Youths’ feelings of belonging within these relationships, fueled by the programs’ consistent meeting times, encourage them to learn from knowledgeable others. Furthermore, these programs offer participants the opportunities to take leadership roles and fashion their own goals.

Although much research has demonstrated the benefits of youth extracurricular programs, less research has examined other forms of organized community initiatives, notably youth employment programs. Extracurricular programs, although important in their ability to increase social and cultural capital for youth, often mandate financial investment. For example, some programs require participants to purchase musical instruments or event tickets. Low-income groups often attend schools and community centers that do not have the financial means to sponsor their involvement in these programs. As a result, youth employment programs, providing their participants with financial capital, offer a promising alternative.

## Youth employment programs

Youth employment programs allow low-income participants to engage in the social development and mentorship activities similar to that of extracurriculars. At the same time, they equip youth with labor training and part- or full-time jobs. The latter two are particularly attractive for low-income youth, as many take up paid work to provide additional sources of income for their families. However, in addition to their job-related attributes, these programs often combine multiple interventions strategies, such as skill training and mentorship, to provide a diverse set of offerings (Kluve et al., 2017). Even if these underserved young populations are unable to participate in community programs such as extracurriculars that require financial expenditure, they still deserve to experience the benefits, such as exposure to adult support and encouragement (Jarrett et al., 2005), that such programs can offer.

Another added benefit of many of these programs is their focus on youth who are either at-risk of dropping out of high school or those who are currently not enrolled. As the labor market has become more and more selective, employers often screen applicants for certain credentials, with acquisition of a high school diploma or comparable certificate as a common requirement (Modestino and Paulsen, 2019). As low-income youth are more likely to be out-of-school compared to higher-income youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), they face additional barriers to job entry. To counter this obstacle, youth employment programs partner with organizations and companies to advocate for these otherwise overlooked job applicants, while helping them secure the necessary high school credentials for future, long-term employers.

### Current work on youth employment programs

Research on youth employment programs is scarce, with few studies exploring the processes through which these programs can provide youth with less measurable, “soft” skills, i.e. social and cultural capital. Even when such research exists, results rely largely on quantitative evidence and present conflicting degrees of program success (Kluve et al., 2017).

One study on the Boston Summer Youth Employment Program compared youth who were selected through the program lottery to those who were not selected, and found that the program reduced youths’ frequency of criminal arraignments but not their likelihood of ever being arraigned (Modestino, 2019; Modestino and Paulsen, 2019). While the program did not eliminate crime, it may have decreased participants’ opportunities to engage in criminal activity, as they likely spent more time at their jobs and trainings. In addition, the study showed that the reduction in criminal frequency continued even in the post-program phase, compared to the control group, indicating potential long term changes.

Another study by Davis and Heller (2017) used administrative datasets to examine the impacts of the One Chicago Summer Plus program and found reductions in violent crime, even after the evaluation period, but no improvements in schooling, post-program employment, or other types of crime. Similarly, research evaluating the NYC DYCD programs has only focused on outcomes derived from IRS records and incarceration data. Gelber (2014) compared NYC SYEP lottery winners to losers and found that the program decreased incarceration rates among those 19 and older by 0.46%, but did not increase subsequent earnings, the probability of future employment, or college enrollment.

Although there is no clear consensus on the success of youth employment programs, many of these findings are promising. Collectively, these results demonstrate that reported positive benefits are not limited to a particular city. Yet, these studies do not capture the nuances of participant learnings and the mechanisms through which participants can harness non-measurable skills. Such skills are of particular importance, as Cunningham and Villaseńor (2016) found that employers rank socio-emotional skills, such as conflict negotiation and professionalism, as most valuable, but also feel that these are the skills that most applicants lack. Therefore, this paper hopes to fill this gap by using qualitative interviews to illustrate how the NYC DYCD youth employment programs can mobilize social and cultural capital gains.

# Methods

In this section, I detail my method of data collection as it relates to my research questions. First, I explain my focus on the DYCD and why I selected this department’s programs for this case study. Then, I explain my selection of interviews as primary data and the nature of my conducted interviews. Finally, I discuss the limitations associated with this methodology.

The DYCD is NYC’s lead department for employing youth in career opportunities throughout the city. The department’s programs continue to expand each year, with SYEP leading the way as one of the largest youth employment programs in the nation. In 2019, the program provided summer jobs for more than 74,300 youth across 13,700 worksites (NYC DYCD, 2019). Each program has been created, staffed, and executed to fit a particular need of underserved youth throughout the city (see Table 1).

As the DYCD oversees several different programs, a focus on this agency will allow me the benefits of both variety and consistency. Using the DYCD, I can examine a wide range of approaches to youth employment that are all grounded by their operation within NYC. Since these programs target youth of different ages in different circumstances, I am able to investigate a wide range of experiences from the perspectives of various administrators and participants. Through my interviews, I compare and contrast the skills emphasized in each program, which allow me to join the experiences of successful and unsuccessful approaches. Although each individual in my study works according to a different set of goals depending on their affiliated program, they are all connected by their shared NYC experience. This environmental similarity is manifested through the regulations, labor conditions, and overall social dynamic that traverses the city.

My selection of interviews as a primary source of data stems from their ability to capture the unique experiences of those who influence, and are influenced by, the examined programs. As my project aims to explore the skills emphasized by a variety of DYCD programs, I interview both participants and on-the-ground staff in order to illustrate multiple perspectives and build a genuine, all-compassing account. Tailoring my questions to the specific interviewee, I probe into the subtleties associated with program alumni events, mental health access, job site placement, and more, through individuals’ rich, personal narratives.

In addition, program participants are experiencing many events for the first time and are constantly adapting to their surroundings. Interviewees mentioned themes of learning a new language, seeking mentors, and reaching out for help. As such, interviews allow me to detail the nuances of their personal growth and its contingency on their specific context.

Most importantly, since I am ultimately interested in measuring social and cultural capital, two relatively abstract concepts, interviews allow me access to information that cannot be captured in quantitative data. Interviewees’ experiences provide in-depth information on how these programs can extend beyond immediate job-related functions to substantially impact participants’ knowledge of institutional workings and expectations. As these programs fundamentally exist to serve real people with real lives, interviews empower their unique, valuable voices.

To recruit participants for this study, I utilized a combination of email outreach and interviewee referral. As I had participated in SYEP and Ladders for Leaders during high school, I already had contact information for several staff members at various providers and emailed these individuals first to request interviews. To source additional staff members and broaden the scope of my participant base, I found several other providers across the city through the DYCD website. Since providers often administer a range of programs, some under the DYCD and some not, I searched the providers’ websites to contact employees who worked directly with DYCD participants (i.e. had a DYCD program name or “youth program” in their title). As my study is centered on participant experiences, I wanted to speak specifically with those interacting with participants and carrying out the programs, rather than those working at organizational levels. In some cases, higher-level individuals connected me with their on-the-ground staff who aligned more with my research purposes.

These initial interviews served a dual purpose—to explore the interactions between program staff and participants, but also to identify potential youth interviewees through staff referrals. As there are increased barriers (privacy concerns and lack of accessible participant lists) to identifying youth participants, this snowball effect allowed me to develop a rapport with program staff and recruit the individuals who this study highlights.

In total, I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews—six with provider staff and six with youth participants. Most of these interviews were done in-person, with three occurring over-the-phone. I began each interview with prepared questions and asked follow-up questions to delve deeper into areas of interest that the interviewee brought up. Broadly, interviews with staff examined their roles, experiences with participants, community building, and program improvements. Interviews with youth focused on personal impacts, program offerings and flaws, and solutions. All interviewed youth participants self-identified as low-income. In addition to the interviews, I attended one Learn and Earn workshop centered on discrimination and identity. To protect confidentiality, all participants were asked whether they preferred to remain anonymous, and pseudonyms are used for those who wished to do so[[1]](#footnote-1).

As with any study, the current study is subject to several limitations. First, some youth interviewees participated in the same DYCD program or were affiliated with the same provider. While these participants cited a diverse set of experiences, their similarity in background along with my relatively small sample size limits the ability of my findings to capture the full extent of participant outlooks. In addition, the snowball technique used to identify youth participants created a participant pool that was guided by staff recommendations. Youth who were not referred by program staff, and subsequently not interviewed, may have different characteristics and experiences than those interviewed.

My participation in the DYCD programs as a high school student afforded me both access to staff who I had previously spoken to, as well as a basis of rapport with those who I contacted for this study. However, my personal experiences may introduce bias to this study’s findings. To combat this potential bias and represent numerous opinions, I sought responses from those whose specific program and affiliated provider differed from mine.

Lastly, my focus on NYC and particularly the youth employment programs under the DYCD limits the generalizability of my study. While this study is able to identify key skills that are impactful for my studied group of youth, the success of these skills may vary depending on the circumstances of the particular social and geographic context.

# Discussion

In this section, I detail and analyze my findings on low-income young people’s navigation of the DYCD programs. I begin with an overview of how and why interviewees became involved in the programs. Then, I explore three different yet intertwined facets of participants’ narratives that drive their successes: workshops, on-the-job learnings, and social support. I end each of these three subsections with a discussion that grounds participants’ gains in social and cultural capital. Finally, I end with challenges that were identified by both participants and staff members to guide my policy recommendations.

## Reasons for program involvement

### Participants

Participants learn about DYCD programs through various sources, and ultimately decide to apply and participate with different agendas in mind. Allison, a 16-year-old high school junior initially found out about Learn and Earn via email and applied to the program after deciding that she wanted an activity to occupy some of her time when she was not in school.

Jenny, a 17-year-old high school senior, first applied to Learn and Earn after receiving an e-newsletter from one of the program’s providers, Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC). She had applied to SYEP through the same provider previously, but was not selected due to the lottery system. Having applied to Learn and Earn in her junior year, Jenny voiced that she thought the program would be beneficial for her future college application process. Jenny also participated in WLG through CPC.

Vera, a 20-year-old college junior, began her journey with the DYCD programs when she was 14. She initially participated in SYEP with the goal of assisting her family financially, participated again the following year, then did WLG, and now works part-time at CPC during the school year. Liam[[2]](#footnote-2), the Program Director for Youth Services at UNITED mentioned that many of the young people he works with also join the programs for financial reasons. These individuals “oftentimes might have parents that are working off the books earning low income. So they have to be the one that has to support the family.”

Riley[[3]](#footnote-3), a college sophomore, was looking for opportunities that would help her determine what she wanted to pursue in college and post-graduation, so she applied for Ladders for Leaders through PENCIL. Since then, she has completed the program twice, and is returning for a third time this coming summer.

Katie, a high school junior who immigrated to the United States when she was 12, recalled that she was searching for programs that serve recent immigrants, helping them learn about American culture and meet others with similar family backgrounds. Since her school did not offer such a program, she looked elsewhere to community centers and ultimately joined CPC’s WLG, where she now works part-time at an ice cream shop in Lower Manhattan.

### Program staff

Several of the current program staff members I spoke with have themselves been participants in one of the DYCD programs. For instance, Liam mentioned that his first exposure to the programs was from SYEP in his junior year of high school. Through SYEP, he learned about the other programs at UNITED, specifically Learn and Earn. After Learn and Earn, he worked part-time at UNITED during college, and returned after graduation to work in his current role. As a past participant, Liam had firsthand experience on which processes and trainings were successful, and how the programs could most effectively impact youth. He stated,

I pretty much wanted to do what was done for me, meaning I wanted to be like someone that can advocate for youth, teach them, and give them a good experience, which is exactly what I had.

In addition, when I asked about his colleagues’ experiences, he started listing those who were also past participants, before realizing that they were *all* past participants.

David, the Worksite Operations Coordinator at Commonpoint Queens, has been at the agency since he was 16, when he worked at their summer camp through SYEP. He participated in SYEP a few more times then returned to the agency after he graduated from college. Similarly, many of David’s colleagues are also alumni of one or a few of the DYCD programs.

## Workshops

### Career-readiness

One of the main types of workshops echoed by participants and staff members was career-readiness training, which include resume writing, mock interviews, and thank you letters. Most of these trainings are standardized by requirements set out by the DYCD, but providers are given some leniency in how they implement these specifications.

For instance, Naomi[[4]](#footnote-4), the Director of Program Operations at STARS, mentioned that her organization has developed its own Ladders for Leaders curriculum which spans three days (roughly 20 hours). Participants work on elevator pitches, personal branding, and professional etiquette. In addition, the organization holds one-on-one resume sessions with business professionals. These opportunities allow participants to learn from those who have been through the hiring process themselves. STARS also hosts LinkedIn panels, inviting employees to share profile tips with students and offer them advice from direct, reputable individuals.

Lily[[5]](#footnote-5), the Ladders for Leaders Program Director at BUILD, mentioned that her organization has recently updated its curriculum to include a social media component, where participants learn the importance of maintaining their digital image. Although social media is ubiquitous in today’s climate, it is separated from professional life in nuanced ways, such as designating LinkedIn as a preferred platform and reframing from friending bosses on Facebook.

In some cases, youth have amassed several different job experiences, but they struggle to market their learned skills to future employers. Many of the low-income youth who Liam serves have previously worked “under-the-table” jobs, where they did not go through a formal interview and cover letter process. For many of these youth, “no one ever gave them the work-readiness spiel... like a resume, cover letters, how to do that” (Liam). Without initial introductions into the workings of professional expectations, these youth often feel lost and isolated, unsure of where or how to begin their journey towards upward mobility.

Naomi cited a similar phenomenon with her participants. However, instead of allowing them to view their past jobs as trivial experiences, Naomi encourages participants to think critically and fashion their previous responsibilities into translatable skills that employers seek:

It’s how do you take, “I took a class or I did a project” and turn that into "I utilized this skill set in these ways to have this outcome," because I think for high school students, especially when they're coming into the program with very little technically professional experience, they feel like they’re not ready and they're not qualified and no one's going to hire them because they've never done anything. So helping them start to reframe things that they've done to be like, oh, these are actually accomplishments that use real skills.

It is this abstract reframing process that many staff members identify as the most important, yet difficult to elucidate, aspect for their participants. In order to understand how to effectively brand past experiences, one must first have an understanding of *what* is professionally desirable. By introducing participants to the workings of this complex reframing process, staff encourage youth to acknowledge that they do in fact have the skills necessary to succeed in their desired roles.

For recent immigrants, adapting to American norms presents additional challenges to their professional success. Liam recalls that many of the immigrants who he works with are unfamiliar with the American job system. For example, the standards for resumes in China often require a photo, although the same is not true in the United States. Liam told me that participants often “get rejected because they made it look like they took it as a joke, when in reality they don’t understand that’s not the format.” These young people who do not pass the initial stipulations for employment consideration are immediately disregarded, without even given the chance to prove their qualifications.

As such, career-readiness workshops often lead low-income participants to discover areas for improvement that they would not have had access to otherwise. In recalling one of her first mock interviews, Riley explained:

I remember the best feedback I got was my first mock interview. Someone was like, sometimes people get nervous and you could tell because of the way they speak but I could tell by the way you looked. He was like, oh, you smiled so hard, you looked like you were nervous through your smile.

Identifying as a low-income, first-generation student, Riley mentioned that without Ladders for Leaders, she likely would not have been able to gain access to individuals who were able to give her this behavioral advice.

Allison stated that the program helped her understand the professional world in “simpler words.” When her and other Learn and Earn participants mentioned that they felt confused by formal e-mail writing, Learn and Earn staff decided to conduct a workshop to address this skill. They covered the technicalities of a formal e-mail, including proper spacing and message conciseness, many of which are implicitly learned through socialization within circles that utilize this form of digital interaction. As e-mails are often a gateway to new connections, recipients have the power to reject the recognition of a sender simply due to the nature of their e-mail. Youth without mastery in this high-culture expectation are then restricted from traveling these avenues towards further opportunity.

In addition to resumes and interviews, programs geared toward out-of-school youth also hold workshops on certifications, such as those in hospitality and retail, that are accredited by national organizations. Jessica, the Director for Youth Services at Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT), stated that Train and Earn participants are not limited to only one certification. They can complete several during the eight-week training, allowing participants to signal a range of technical skills to potential employers.

At the end of the day, however, the effectiveness of these workshops is dependent on participant attendance and involvement. Orientations can cover up to eight hours in a day—a significant amount of time for participants who often travel across boroughs for these sessions while juggling other responsibilities in their home and family lives. In addition, some participants struggle with mental health issues, with symptoms including social anxiety that may prevent them from attending the workshops. In many cases, workshop attendance is mandatory for completing the program and qualifying for job placement, but many underserved young people face additional barriers beyond possessing the correct resume or interview skill sets.

### School-related

Although termed “youth employment programs,” these programs recognize that many of their participants either work part-time while balancing school responsibilities or are not currently enrolled in school. In response, many of these programs offer school-targeted opportunities such as college trips, financial aid assistance, and HSE classes.

Many of the participants commented that without college visit programming, they would not have been able to see a school until they arrived on campus for their freshman year. When Jenny recounted the past few months of exploring different colleges and post-high school options, she told me, “I feel like it comes with low-income background... we wouldn’t be able to afford college trips, and they’re a really big part in exploring campus vibes and understanding the diversity of the school and just knowing college better.” For Jenny and many other students, these trips allow them the chance to physically visit a school and decide if the expectations that they developed from their mailed brochures match their firsthand experiences with the school’s campus.

These school-related events also allow participants to actualize the idea of even being able to enroll in higher education. Liam recounted that many low-income participants do not believe that they are able to afford college because of the high sticker price, and do not realize that they have the potential to qualify for scholarships or financial aid that would render college financially attainable. Many low-income parents, especially those who do not hold more than a high school diploma, may feel apprehensive about the daunting view of college: “They're like, sorry, we can't pay for you. You know, we're low income. We don't have that much money. And that's their mindset” (Liam). As youth often use their parents mindsets’ to help navigate their world, they risk narrowing their own considerations of potential paths.

Similarly, Katie noted that it was difficult for her parents to understand *what* college even is in the United States, let alone the nuances between different colleges and universities:

It's really helpful for me because my parents can't really help me with these and they don't really speak English... We don't really know any history of college in America... There is no one to help us, when [our] classmates have legacy, they have grandparents to help them. But we are working on our own and our friends can't even understand us.

Beyond seeking advice from their parents or grandparents, Katie’s account emphasizes that many of these young people are unable to translate their experiences seamlessly to their friends. While many young people share common experiences to help one another, underserved youth often “[work] on their own.” They explore various routes without the guidance from others that may allow them to find the best individual path.

Shuk highlights that although the current societal expectation is to enroll in a 4-year degree immediately after high school, this may not be the most suitable avenue for some students. Instead of requiring participants to attend college, she instead encourages them to explore other options, such as online classes, vocational training, and the military. Most importantly, “If they are not ready, they can take a break. But there must always be a plan.” Allowing students the chance to consider a pause in their educational journeys enables them to thoroughly assess possible alternatives instead of rushing to make a decision. Above all, Shuk ensures that she develops an agenda with these young people, motivating them to be proactive in their lives and develop confidence in their individual choices.

In particular, Train and Earn recognizes that youth come from many different backgrounds, and offers participants the opportunity to enroll in classes to supplement their career-readiness training. Jessica mentioned that OBT participants who wish to obtain their HSE diploma can take on-site classes with NYC Department of Education teachers after their initial eight-week training. Upon completion of the exam, students can enroll in the program’s standard job placement process, now equipped with a common prerequisite that many employers mandate when hiring.

Like the career-readiness workshops, however, youth must attend and participate in the workshops in order to receive their diploma. Some program participants may have a learning disability and require additional resources, yet many of the participants that Jessica works with have not yet been diagnosed. Thus, they likely do not have an Individualized Education Program, which permits them additional time on exams and allows providers a greater understanding of how to best support their needs. While some of the school-focused programming is effective for participants, this variety and complexity in participants’ traits complicate the ability of the programs to sufficiently address the needs of all.

### Social awareness

During our conversation, Shuk emphasized that Learn and Earn, one of the programs she oversees, serves much more than basic afterschool purposes. Geared toward low-income youth who are at-risk for dropping out, the program allows participants access to safe, welcoming environments where they can connect and speak in-depth about pertinent social issues.

Shuk invited me to a Learn and Earn workshop facilitated by Project Reach, a youth center located in Chinatown with a mission to “[challenge] the destruction among, of, and between NYC's disparate youth communities” by “[recognizing] that the empowerment of disenfranchised youth communities is critical and integral to their participation as future leaders in the larger movement for social justice” (Project Reach, n.d.). After arriving at the center, I learned that this session was one in a three-part series focused on different types of social justice issues for Learn and Earn participants. Facilitated by Project Reach’s staff members and featuring several student-led, interactive activities, that week’s 90-minute workshop centered on identity and discrimination.

To begin, one of the facilitators posted a large sheet of paper on the front wall that listed several components of our identities, including sex, gender, ethnicity, class, immigrant status, ability, and health status. We were given circle-shaped stickers and asked to place a different colored sticker for each of the following situations: what we feel is the most important, what people do not feel comfortable discussing, where we feel safe, and where we feel we have the most power. Each situation was followed by a group discussion, where participants were asked to share their thoughts and experiences if they were comfortable doing so. Participants spoke at length with their peers about how their culture defines how they view politics, how their immigrant status threatens their safety, and the differences between power and privilege.

Throughout the discussion, new topics were brought up to explore areas of interest. When one participant asked about the definition of intersex, we delved into a conversation about how we can reduce the current stigma and support intersex individuals who have been marginalized in America. It was most of the group’s first time hearing about this issue, along with many others that were discussed this day.

This account serves as just one snapshot into the ways through which youth employment programs can surpass their conventional, career-oriented mission. Through workshops such as these, participants uncover findings about their individual struggles and passions. At the same time, they learn the value of empathy and critical thinking, skills that fuel them in their future endeavors and promote their personal development.

Given the intersectionality of many of their identities (socio-economic status, household stability, immigrant status, etc.) many underserved youth must not only navigate their schools and careers, but must also balance circumstances unfamiliar to many of their peers. In some cases, these youth lack stable relationships with their parents or family members due to differences in culture. For instance, Riley feels that professional success is necessary for helping advance her family’s status. Yet, it is difficult for them to help her navigate this foreign world since they did not grow up in American culture.

In Riley’s case and many more, low-income parents want nothing more than to help their children succeed, but their lack of experience prevents them from feeling prepared to do so. In response, some youth and young adults develop feelings of resentment towards family members, confused and angered by their place within the world and exacerbated by numerous obstacles that threaten their success. Shuk detailed this inter-generational conflict:

There’s a barrier, a communication barrier, because [parents] try to understand cultural differences like values, and I guess it's very difficult. And as a parent, they try to do their best... we need to teach [youth] to have empathy and understanding and, you know, don't forget where you're coming from.

Instead of socializing underserved young people to think and act in particular culture-aligning ways, social awareness programming serves to uplift youth. These trainings embrace how young people’s backgrounds are strengths that shape who they are, not flaws that must be erased.

For example, in her discussion of the various career-readiness Ladders for Leaders trainings, Riley mentioned one workshop where she attended an all-Latino panel at the New York Times headquarters. During the session, panelists discussed the fight against minority underrepresentation in the media and how “identity is still a very big part of [their] work life” (Riley). Rather than dismissing participants’ identities and pushing dominant societal expectations, this workshop addressed the disparities and hostility that marginalized young people may face.

In a similar vein, Liam commented that UNITED’s SYEP curriculum hopes to empower young people to advocate for causes central to their own lives. In one of the program’s civic engagement sessions, he asked participants to draw a map of their current neighborhood, then asked what they would *want* their neighborhood to look like. For many of his low-income participants, this activity was met with requests for libraries and bookstores. In support of these responses, Liam advised participants on ways to get involved in their communities, including expressing concerns to local officials and joining an advocacy group at their school. He expressed that he strives to make these social awareness initiatives accessible to all participants, allowing them to join a cause that they are passionate about and challenge the social constructs that have been placed on them.

Katie, a participant in WLG and SYEP, spoke at length about how the social awareness initiatives at CPC have refined her perception of the difficulties facing her community. As an immigrant, Katie expressed that she, along with her family, were not aware of many government policies in the United States, including the census. Many members of her community, especially those who are undocumented, refrain from responding due to fears that their citizenship will be at stake. These individuals are often initially unaware that their absent responses undermine the funding available to their community centers, and learn about these benefits through program participants such as Katie.

Beyond social issue-focused workshops, Katie recalled how her summer job allowed her to explore the public sector even though it was not geared specifically toward government policy work. She worked at a public garden in Manhattan, where she found herself immersed in a realm of knowledge about rising sea levels, public space demolition, and sustainability. During our conversation, she said, “I get to open a new world. I get to see a different side of the city.” Katie’s comment highlights how the power of crossing boundaries allows individuals to develop a richer context about their world and the opportunities, or lack, within. In popular culture, NYC is classified as a diverse city where inhabitants are free to pursue their dreams. However, these possibilities only exist when individuals are aware of them and believe that journeys along these paths are feasible.

### Workshops: discussion

These three types of workshops—career-readiness, school-related, and social awareness—all support youth in navigating complex environments and behaviors through gains in social and cultural capital. For instance, BUILD’s work-readiness social media training, which informs participants of the differences between casual and professional social media use, is a form of embodied cultural capital. Such cultural capital is learned from one’s environments and the individuals within, shaping how one thinks and interacts with others (Bourdieu, 1986). Skill reframing, in which individuals restructure descriptions of their professional experiences to directly address employers’ qualifications, is also a type of embodied cultural capital; it involves a dual process of understanding what employers seek, then actively, or implicitly, emphasizing these skills within interviews and cover letters. When individuals do so implicitly, it becomes incorporated within their habitus, guiding their identity formation and future behavior.

Knowledge of the various post-high school options and financial aid also represent forms of embodied cultural capital. As mentioned by Jenny, a lack of such opportunities often “comes with low-income background.” Oftentimes, high-income young people have clear access to individuals who can provide this knowledge of professional and academic behaviors. However, this information is critical to developing plans that are aimed at bolstering underserved young people’s success and their self-efficacy in making informed decisions. Such workshops aim to deconstruct the far too common parallel between “low-income” and restricted access.

In addition, the HSE diploma emphasized by Train and Earn acts as a form of institutionalized cultural capital, which is the embodiment of cultural capital into defined qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). This form of cultural capital allows participants to showcase their knowledge and competencies to employers in a widely recognized format. With this physical representation of cultural capital, youth now have the ability to accumulate even more cultural capital, such as a college degree or professional experiences.

The social awareness programming enables youth to supplement their professional and academic learnings by deep diving into issues that personally impact their identities. During the Learn and Earn workshop, participants were free to ask questions and pursue complex topics to decipher what it means to be an underserved young person in America. They were guided through exercises that did not gloss over their struggles, but rather addressed the injustice and rejection that they may have encountered from others. Although cultural capital can largely be used to produce social stratification, especially if it is withheld from individuals, these workshops exemplify the ability of cultural capital to empower youth. In such workshops, youth are educated on issues, such as lack of neighborhood funding, then employ this wealth of cultural capital to practice strategies, including organizational advocacy, to improve their communities.

These resulting interactions between young people and their communities generate valuable social capital that reinforce the former’s membership within the latter. Through initial introductions into the workings of their neighborhoods, youth begin to form bonds with other members. Sharing information about personal struggles such as housing instability and undocumented status, participants develop a greater sense of trust and belonging within their environments.

These youths’ navigation of social and cultural capital will inevitably differ from that of their peers since the former’s identities are not seen as the “norm.” However, the program’s influential adults introduce youth to the ways that they have leveraged institutional knowledge within their own lives to advocate for themselves and their communities. These workshops help dispel the notion that underserved youth are “outsiders” because of their backgrounds, thus opening up a network of opportunities previously available to only those on the privileged “inside.”

## On-the-job learnings

Through their jobs and internships, DYCD programs expose young people to the nuances of employment settings, including the hierarchy of the workplace and professional etiquette. Katie told me that as a cashier at an ice cream shop, “you get to know how to cooperate with your coworkers and you get to see [what] a real experience is like.” Although she does not describe the job as particularly “fancy,” it still allows her a lens into work-relevant practices, such as collaborating with coworkers.

These refined professional skills also spill over into participants’ personal endeavors. Riley recalled a situation in her past internship that pushed her to improve one of her traits both in the workplace and in her own life. She mentioned that she liked to be in control of every situation, having a meticulous grasp on deadlines to ensure that all members complete their assigned tasks. When she was placed on a group assignment, this challenged her established, comfortable work routine. By communicating with her peers and jointly integrating their ideas, Riley learned to “let go of [her] insecurities and stop thinking that people won’t put in their effort.” Through this experience, she refined her ability to work efficiently with others, ultimately producing a more successful outcome than what would have resulted without a united group effort. While Riley maintains that she still identifies as a “control freak,” this experience pushed her to tap into workplace understandings in order to positively impact her own development.

Vera also emphasized how SYEP and WLG have pushed her to constantly improve herself, working on her weaknesses while highlighting her strengths. Through her role as a Worksite Monitor at CPC, she acts as a liaison between participants and worksites, communicating with and supporting participants in their jobs and internships. Before entering WLG six years ago, she noted that she rarely spoke to others, telling me, “I feel like I didn’t think I had the power to say anything back.” Through speaking with participants and sharing common experiences, Vera slowly became more confident in her ability to engage with others.

### On-the-job learnings: discussion

Many participants shared stories similar to that of Vera’s of not previously believing in their power to speak out, oftentimes due to past rejections. These experiences molded their self-efficacies, limiting their perceptions of attainable success within the dominant American culture. However, work experiences allow youth to gain firsthand experience in professional environments and actualize their career goals. The skills they accumulate, such as collaboration and multi-tasking, are captured in their embodied cultural capital. As they take on increased responsibilities in their jobs, they add more experiences to their cultural repertoire and use them to gain access to other employment opportunities. Although employment programs are unable to instantly alter perspectives, inclusive work environments serve as outlets for youth to strengthen their beliefs in themselves and fully take advantage of their learned experiences.

## Community and social networks

### Mentorship

Sadly in today's world, it's all about who you know. For a lot of these young people, sometimes they don't have a positive role model or they don't have anybody they can reach out to. –Liam

Although Liam’s comment paints a dreary picture of low-income young people’s prospects, interviewees have confessed that it often resembles reality. In many cases, those without gatekeepers’ support are barred from prospective avenues of opportunity before even given an attempt. In turn, DYCD programs often include mentorship components where adults connect with participants, learn about their interests, and expose them to potential connections, internships, and events.

For example, David recounted an instance when a participant was interested in law enforcement, but Commonpoint Queens did not have on-site resources to assist him. However, the agency tapped into its network and introduced the participant to a local precinct, which provided him access to the proper information.

Similarly, interviewed participants all agreed on the importance of mentors in helping scaffold their successes. These mentors do not only expose them to actionable opportunities, such as those in the previous account, but they also allow youth to confide in another individual who will champion their triumphs. When speaking to Katie about her mentors, she remarked,

Mentors are really important not just for high school students, but for everyone in general. They are the people who [encourage] you to step out when you want to ask for a raise, if you want to do something challenging [where] there is some risk in it, and mentors will be the people who push you.

Through their motivations, program mentors convey to participants that taking risks and challenging oneself are positive attributes. At the same time, these mentors recognize that such risks may not always be successful. Regardless, they remind youth that they will support them even if events do not manifest in expected ways. This constant encouragement is indispensable in cultivating a safe, welcoming relationship where participants are more likely to trust the opinions of their mentors. This trust ultimately reinforces the relationship as well as the participant’s sense of belonging in the program.

OBT’s Train and Earn program is an apt example of this unwavering support. Counselors have one-on-one sessions with participants to set goals before the start of the program, then check in after four weeks to jointly assess performance and foreseeable obstacles. If participants feel that they are not ready to continue to the next step, they can ask for a “Restart Day,” which counselors will grant with no questions asked. Jessica mentioned that without these programs, many of her participants would not have been given a second chance. For these social supports to be successful, “it’s about celebrating all their little successes and also building in a lot of cushion.”

Other staff members also prized the importance of acknowledging each and every accomplishment. When participants reach out to Lily with a question about Ladders for Leaders, her first priority is to show her appreciation for their message, signaling to these youth that she welcomes their concerns:

When a student just calls me to ask a question the last thing I would say is thank you so much for calling, it was a great question. You know, just to encourage them to do it again. Letting them know that it was the right thing what they did, that they should have done it. You did the right thing. You’re advocating for yourself. You did it in a respectful manner.

By giving young people positive feedback in response to their questions, Lily demonstrates that their actions are desired, and hopefully, that they should do the same in the future.

### Youth support groups

In addition to one-on-one mentorships, DYCD program participants highlighted that the programs have also allowed them to bridge connections with their fellow participants. When speaking to Learn and Earn participants at the social awareness workshop, they told me that few of them knew each other before the program, but the program allowed them a place to gather and form strong bonds. Yafa mentioned that they typically have programming five days a week, but moreover, that the program gives her a safe space to work, hang out, and talk through issues that she is going through. Before the program, she held the belief that she would simply attend workshops to fulfil the requirements set out by the DYCD:

I didn’t realize it would be a community, I thought we would just sit in a room for two hours to qualify for the internship at the end of the year. But it’s actually a community, and support, and there’s a lot of resources available to you, which is really amazing especially for people of lower income, because we would not get these otherwise.

Given their differences in upbringing, low-income participants may struggle to comfortably disclose personal information to their peers. Yafa’s narrative draws attention to the fact that the Learn and Earn community is composed of peers who share similar backgrounds, collectively looking for a place where they can find escape from troubling outside obstacles while learning from and growing alongside others.

Having friends in the programs also encourages participants to attend workshops, even those that are voluntary. When describing one of the Ladders for Leaders alumni, Naomi commented that “she has a little community within the Ladders network, like when she comes to events, she comes with like four people and they're all Ladders kids.” Stemming from their shared experiences, program participants encourage one another, thereby fortifying their identity and place within the Ladders network. This strengthening of participants’ group membership then allows them to contribute more to the community and offer support to a larger network of social ties. As reiterated by Liam, “We notice in our program that whenever the young people are kind to each other, they're more empathetic towards each other and they work together on everything.” While the program creates weak initial bonds between participants, compassionate interactions within the group combine to form a respectful group dynamic, in which participants share more and more about their lives and work collectively to problem solve, further increasing their social connection to the group.

The nature of this environment is made possible by the participants’ shared backgrounds. Liam explained that he begins all Advance and Earn orientations by asking participants to provide introductions. As he works with a predominantly immigrant population, many are learning not only English, but also how to navigate complex American norms. Liam felt that if these youth were placed in situations where they were the only ones who were struggling with the language, that they would be afraid of speaking and abandon an opportunity to work on their language skills. Moreover, he told me:

It's very easy for someone who speaks English fluently. You could talk to anyone like, hey, how's it going? It's okay. [English learners] are not even sure if they should say anything, or they feel shy and might say it wrong.

In Advance and Earn’s created space, participants can try a new word or phrase, with a decreased fear that they will be judged negatively for speaking incorrectly. This social network created by participants is specific to them, fueled by their collective mission to improve their language capabilities and achieve greater economic mobility. Participants serve as support systems for each other, as evident by Liam’s description that native English speakers sometimes partner and practice with those who are still learning the language.

Some providers also hold alumni panels, in which those who have already completed the program speak to new participants about their experiences with the workshops as well as their jobs or internships. Having completed the program several times, Riley told me that the panels allow her to offer insight to younger participants who may be apprehensive about the process. She advises them on key understandings that they should consider throughout the process, such as making sure to set aside time for every budding opportunity. Hearing these learnings from a young person, new participants are able to process and employ these culturally-relevant professional reasonings in a language that is comprehensible to them.

Lastly, Jenny mentioned that CPC provides Learn and Earn participants the opportunity to participate in Youth Council. Participants elect representatives among their group who speak on their behalf in staff meetings. To gather group opinion, the Council holds monthly sessions to present and debate new ideas. Through these meetings, youth develop their leadership and public speaking skills while recognizing that their peers’ opinions are valued.

### Community and social networks: discussion

The mentorship and youth support components of the DYCD programs combine multiple elements of social capital—trust, mutual recognition, and information exchange, just to name a few. An important element of these relationships is ensuring that participants feel supported throughout the process, not just during the beginning stages. As exemplified by OBT’s Train and Earn, DYCD mentors check in with mentees regularly and create timelines based on their needs. These relationships allow participants to develop a greater sense of trust with others, ultimately forming strong social ties in which both parties acknowledge responsibility and commitment toward the other.

Drawing from Lin’s (2017) network-based theory of social capital, program involvement can act as a type of credential which can be easily communicated to other group members. David’s example, in which one of his participants accessed information about law enforcement through the provider’s network, speaks directly to this notion. Program credentialing allowed the participant the ability to generate wide-ranging connections, strengthening his overall social capital and allowing him to both access and mobilize the resources within the program’s network.

The interactions between Liam’s immigrant participants directly illustrates this increased ease of information sharing. When placed in a group of fluent English speakers, participants tend to feel insecure of their language abilities and refrain from talking. When surrounded by other immigrants, however, they are more likely to communicate and exchange accumulated knowledge. These connections allow participants to bridge more and more bonds, facilitating accumulation of a culturally-prized resource, English proficiency.

As social capital is closely intertwined with cultural capital, participants’ social connections often grant them access to cultural information. Lily’s “thank you” notes towards participants exemplify this transmission between the two types of capital. Through encouraging youth to reach out and ask questions, Lily facilitates participants’ accumulation and understanding of embodied cultural capital. Rather than viewing the act of asking questions as a nuisance to the receiver that should be avoided, Lily’s gesture communicates to these youth that character traits such as curiosity and inquisitiveness are culturally valued skills that are drivers of success.

As program mentors often possess certain credentials, such as college degrees, respected jobs, or culturally valued traits, others are more likely to critically consider their perspectives. As such, program mentors represent powerful influences on youth. As Liam stated, mentors have the responsibility to “make the message and make sure it's always [positive]” and to “propel it forward.” DYCD program mentors ensure that they are placing youths’ backgrounds in the greater societal and cultural context to offer well-suited recommendations. Participants enhance these experiences for each other, offering empathy and trust to deepen the bonds within their communities. Equipped with these social networks, participants master the skills they gain through the programs to one day “propel it forward” for other young people.

## Not without their challenges

### Reliance on a lottery system

Although the DYCD programs aim to serve all underserved NYC youth, this mission is realistically not feasible given the massive number of interested applicants. Many of the programs, notably SYEP, utilize a lottery system to give all participants equal opportunities to participate in the program, yet participants have no control over the selection process. David noted that one young person had applied to the program every year since she was 14 years old—she finally gained a spot when she 21. For her and many other young people, opportunities are limited. In 2019, over 151,000 young people applied to SYEP, and less than half were selected (NYC DYCD, 2019).

Companies are more likely to hire youth through the DYCD programs instead of through their own procedures, since the salaries of DYCD-contracted youth are typically absorbed by the city. For some programs, such as Ladders for Leaders, the DYCD recently mandated that a greater portion of worksites pay the wages of participants, instead of relying on the city. Naomi found that many employers are frustrated with this new requirement and withdraw from the program. These companies often do not have the funding to pay for participants or do not see them as a priority. Thus, the odds for Ladders for Leaders applicants are even lower, with around 17% of participants ultimately receiving an internship offer. What happens to youth who are not accepted?

### Numbers-based measurement

Multiple providers exist across the city, and each may hold contracts with several different DYCD programs that run concurrently. In order to streamline the evaluation process and determine which providers will receive renewal approval, the DYCD measures providers on a quantitative, outcome-based model. As these programs serve many groups of youth, some of whom lack stable homes or are out-of-school, providers cannot just focus on resume tips or professional wear. They must do so while also integrating English learning sessions, mentorship partnerships, and a plethora of other services, all while ensuring that participants feel welcome and safe within their sites. As iterated by Naomi, “As an organization we are student-focused and we are thinking about quality. We are thinking about the experience of the student.” While many staff members commented that the DYCD is driven by concrete metrics, providers often hold themselves accountable to different goals.

Evaluations that only measure the number of job placements that providers secure or that highlight a single “success story” of a young person who “beat the odds and triumphed despite multiple obstacles” neglect to consider the thousands of youth who have been considerably impacted by the programs. These youth may not have achieved success in accordance with the DYCD’s benchmarks (i.e. obtaining a job after orientation), but through working towards their HSE diploma or gaining more confidence speaking with strangers, they have still grown significantly in their personal journeys. Yet, their social and cultural gains are often not captured by strict outcome-based models.

### Lack of diversity

Lily, Naomi, and David all cited lack of participant diversity as one of the main challenges that they face in their programs. Especially for more selective programs such as Ladders for Leaders, many participants come from similar high-achieving high schools, applying after hearing about the program from friends or family members. When speaking about the need for greater participation from underserved minority populations, Naomi recounted a conversation that her colleague had with the Young Black Men’s Initiative at one of the city’s community colleges:

They were talking about recruiting students and how do we get more kids in, and they were like, [students] don't want to do it. They don't know anyone who's been successful in it because the word’s not getting out in high school. So nobody is applying, like it's not in their community. So they don't know and they don't know how the process works.

In many cases, applying to DYCD programs involves a degree of social and cultural capital. Lacking connections with past program participants who know how to navigate the process, underserved youth may feel excluded and believe that the programs are not meant for them.

Those who do wish to apply must display knowledge of several elements of the application. They must know where to apply, which programs are right for them, which documents they need, and how to fill out the application. If young people are not in settings where applying to these programs is a commonly recognized practice, they may not select the correct program or submit incorrect components of the application, which threatens their acceptance. Information about the programs is unequally distributed among young people, which hinders their prospective feelings of belonging within the program and further distances them from participating.

### Lack of mental health services

Although some providers offer mental health resources, these services are generally not required by the DYCD, especially in short-term programs such as SYEP. Several programs (including Advance and Earn and Train and Earn) are more long-term and specifically serve those who are disconnected from schools and the job market. Many staff members said that a portion of these programs’ young people live in unstable, sometimes violent communities. Some participants enter the programs with complex obstacles or are met with challenges a few weeks in. These barriers hinder their ability to even leave their homes, much less sit through hours of workshops and absorb unfamiliar information.

In addition, Jessica mentioned that 50% of OBT’s Train and Earn participants have been diagnosed with a learning disability, and many more display symptoms but remain undiagnosed. This lack of evaluation results from a wide array of factors, such as absences in early schooling where many other children may have been screened, or the inability to access health providers.

Especially disheartening is the fact that there is only one evaluator for all youth who need an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in Brooklyn—that is one evaluator for thousands of young people. Many participants schedule appointments a month in advance, as an evaluation takes several hours and there are more youth who need screenings than there are hours in a work day. Moreover, when youth drop out of school and decide to get their HSE diploma, they lose the clauses, such as specialized teacher support, laid out in their IEP. Without the resources to diagnose participants, providers struggle to assist these youth to the best of their abilities, given their limited available funding.

# Policy Recommendations

In the following section, I discuss potential policies and address each aforementioned challenge sequentially. Before doing so, I must highlight the importance of the work of program providers. These organizations often do not operate solely as passive liaisons between the DYCD and participants, but instead offer participants additional supports that are not required of them under the DYCD. Such supports are recognized through offers to connect participants with other agencies in the provider’s network, recreational activities, and English learning assistance. Since providers serve as the primary contacts for participants, many of the following recommendations inevitably impact these organizations, and special attention should be given to support their work.

## Greater support from employers to increase lottery odds

For the thousands of denied DYCD applicants, few comparable alternatives exist. With respect to SYEP, many employers are unwilling to train and hire short-term employees, especially if they do not enter with existing skills. Past job experience acts as a form of cultural capital, signaling to employers that a candidate has desirable skills. Without this past experience, many underserved young people are not given opportunities by non-DYCD contracted worksites.

In response, a greater number of employers must commit to a DYCD contract, even if this means that they will be the ones paying the wages. In programs such as Ladders for Leaders, participants are all trained through their providers. After the training, some will end up in internships that are paid for by the city while others will be covered by their employers. David mentioned that the number of Ladders for Leaders slots has shrunk over the last few years, likely because employers are unwilling to comply with the DYCD’s requirement of employer-paid salaries.

One proposition to incentivize employers is to provide subsidies for each youth hire, particularly underserved youth, similar to the federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC). The WOTC offers tax credits to employers who hire disadvantaged groups, such as SNAP recipients, vocational rehabilitation referrals, and summer youth employees. The program has been shown to increase short-term wages for applicable employees (Hamersma, 2008), yet only few companies that employ eligible workers participate in the program. Employers must recognize that youth are capable of working diligently and learning responsibilities in the workplace, and give them sufficient chances to do so. These young people will have received training through their providers prior to their internships. Thus, they will have been given preliminary exposure and will have backgrounds on their jobs, further refining their skills throughout the duration of the program.

In addition, after participants complete the program, additional support should be offered to help them locate a non-DYCD internship or job. For example, providers can match each participant with a year-long counselor who will check in on them and provide additional career support. Most importantly, these counselors can assist them in navigating the job market without relying on the lottery system. These youth will have already accumulated job experience and will likely be older. As a result, it will be easier for them to obtain jobs with non-DYCD employers, compared to younger participants with no work experience. More hiring of youth at non-DYCD employers decreases the number of DYCD applicants, thereby increasing the chances of selection for those who do apply. For this approach to work, buy-in from employers is crucial. They must advocate for the success of all youth, not only those who they can employ for free through the DYCD.

## Qualitative program evaluation

Providers who do not fulfill the benchmarks set out by the DYCD are deemed unsuccessful, which threatens their chances of renewing their contracts the following year. As Naomi described,

They have numbers and goals they need to hit and that is what they hold you accountable to. And they have metrics and dashboards and it's this number, hit that number, do this, do that. And there is not a lot of quality assessment outside.

As a result, providers are pushed to churn out as many job placements as possible, signaling to the DYCD that they have fulfilled their expectations of offering work to youth. However, this quantitative approach does not measure the additional programming that enables participants to grow their network and succeed beyond the completion of the program.

In order to better evaluate the needs of providers and their impacts on young people, the DYCD should offer providers greater flexibility in assessment. More specifically, they should create plans that align best with the needs of the provider’s population. For example, providers that serve predominantly immigrant populations often designate considerable amounts of time to improving English skills. Improved evaluations can assess the degree to which participants have progressed in their language learning. Several other employment programs have utilized such a participant-focused approach with demonstrated success. The Galpão Aplauso Program in Brazil places participants in tracks based on performance on a preliminary exam. The program then offers each cohort personalized support instead of expecting all participants to achieve the same definition of success on the same timeline (Calero et al., 2017).

In addition, as these programs ultimately exist to benefit young people, they should hold some influence in program evaluation. The current provider RFP criteria as outlined by the DYCD includes “quality and quantity of successful relevant experience, demonstrated level of organizational capability, and quality of proposed program approach” (NYC DYCD, 2017). As such, the process does not currently account for participants’ opinions. Participants should be able to send in evaluations for providers, detailing their experiences with staff members, their worksites, and the level of support they received. These evaluations will allow the DYCD a better understanding of the successes and failures of the providers, as well as the perspectives of the participants that cannot be measured through simple yes or no assessments.

## Increased partnerships with schools and between providers

One of the most often cited and difficult to navigate challenges is the lack of diversity within the programs’ populations. The DYCD has already begun making strides towards reducing this disparity by instituting SYEP subgroups such as Vulnerable Youth. This initiative guarantees placement to those who are: a) homeless or runaway youth; b) justice-involved youth; c) youth in or aging out of foster care; or d) youth in families who are receiving preventive services (NYC DYCD, 2017). In addition, Lily described a recent DYCD strategy that encourages providers to collaborate and form SYEP-to-Ladders for Leaders pipelines for qualified youth.

Yet, many youth still do not apply to these programs, as “no one has ever talked to them about what this looks like” (Naomi). Numerous providers have already recognized that this is a major problem of the programs. In response, they have partnered with several high schools, sending staff members to hold information sessions and walk students through the application process. These interactions increase students’ odds of both knowing about and getting selected into the program. As Lily remarked, “I'm paying attention to content and grammar and spelling, but I also want to see potential and passion and... your story and that might assist in getting selected into the program.” These information sessions allow youth to directly come into contact with the programs, creating social ties that can be further strengthened through program participation.

To reinforce these efforts, greater communication between providers is necessary. The DYCD should develop a system that allows providers to match youth with programs available at other sites. For example, a current Learn and Earn participant may decide to drop out, which disqualifies them from the program. However, their provider can communicate with others to help identify an Advance and Earn spot. This ensures that the youth is not forgotten and remains connected to the job market.

Furthermore, providers should continue to partner with schools across NYC. The DYCD can hold information sessions with guidance counselors in each district. The department can educate counselors on the various employment programs, as well as local providers. Schools can designate one staff member to serve as the DYCD representative, allowing students a more salient, accessible form of contact when they have questions about the programs. As noted, many of these youth lack adequate representation and do not feel included in the programs. Adults within their communities must prioritize advocating for them by building strong relationships and scaffolding their learnings throughout the process.

## Access to mental health supports

Many participants do not just fall under the qualifications that deem them eligible for the program, but face additional trauma not captured by their applications. In particular, providers that serve youth who struggle with mental health should partner with aligning organizations. Jessica noted that counselors at OBT are all currently clinically trained, but not all providers require the same for their staff. Programs that allow youth to receive mental health services would create a more safe and welcoming space for participants. Through these initiatives, youth can gain access to a network of helpful adults and resources that they likely would not have otherwise.

Similarly, some education-based programs serve a large population of special needs youth. Providers should help secure greater access to evaluators who can assess participants’ learning capabilities and create agendas that allow them to succeed in the program. Thus, participants will not need to wait a month before receiving an evaluation, at which point they may have already left the program. Furthermore, providers should be given access to special needs teachers who are able to facilitate learning most effectively for students with learning disabilities. With the help of their community, these mental health supports enable students to direct more focus towards their studies and jobs, hopefully eliminating barriers that stand in the way of their goals.

# Conclusion

The term “youth employment programs” does not successfully capture the full extent of the DYCD initiatives. Low-income young people initially join these programs in hopes of receiving a short-term job or internship, but the impacts are felt long after the program is complete. Through these programs, young people gain access to a world of professional behaviors, character building opportunities, and social issue awareness. At the same time, they build new connections and strengthen their identities within safe communities of similar others. Participants gave diverse accounts of how the programs allowed them to navigate various school and career paths. Along the way, they met new individuals who opened up even more doors for them to grow and develop. In parallel, providers supported these learnings, connecting youth to external resources when they did not have the answers directly.

However, these successes come with several challenges. The use of a lottery system excludes a large portion of young people who are not as lucky as their selected peers. In many cases, even entry into the lottery involves a certain amount of social and cultural capital. In addition, program evaluation is largely quantitative, with the DYCD failing to account for individual participant milestones. Lastly, although the programs serve large populations of disadvantaged young people, providers lack sufficient mental health resources beyond that provided by staff members, most of whom are not clinically trained.

I offer several recommendations to mitigate these barriers, including increased employment opportunities from employers, provider-specific evaluations, greater communication between providers and schools, and access to mental health services on-site. At the same time, I want to underscore that the DYCD programs and similar youth programs should not be seen as the sweeping remedy for all challenges faced by underserved youth. These programs are of utmost importance in their unique position within the intersection of education, employment, and the community, but they should not be responsible for solving all of these issues. However, due to their ability to communicate with these different spheres, it is their responsibility to make strides towards improvement in each dimension possible.

Each and every young person who I spoke with told me some variation of the following: “I wouldn’t have access to it without the program.” The list of “its” is far too extensive to accept—mental health support, trusted adults, college information, and so on. Young people come to these programs seeking help and support, and it is our responsibility to provide “it.” These programs may initially aim to provide certifications or internships, but in reality, a young person’s life represents an interwoven mosaic of family dynamics, personal goals, and external conflicts. We must redefine what it means to be successful in today’s vernacular, challenging social and cultural structures while cultivating a more inclusive, empowering space for young people to thrive on their own terms.

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1. Participants with pseudonyms are noted in the Discussion [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Participant’s name and affiliated provider are pseudonyms [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Participant’s name is a pseudonym [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Participant’s name and affiliated provider are pseudonyms [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Participant’s name and affiliated provider are pseudonyms [↑](#footnote-ref-5)