Building Equitable Pathways Series

JFF

How Intermediaries Can Help Black and Latinx Youth Develop a Strong Occupational Identity

Four Principles of Practice

AT A GLANCE

This document identifies guiding principles that intermediary staff members and leaders can use to support equitable career outcomes for youth—particularly Black and Latinx youth and young people who are experiencing poverty. These four principles are imperatives for how staff members at intermediary organizations can design strategies for guiding and engaging with youth.

AUTHORS

Nancy Hoffman
Senior Advisor, **JFF**

Lucretia Murphy
Senior Director, **JFF**

Gregory Seaton
Associate Director, **JFF**

DECEMBER 2020

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and every partner in the Building Equitable Pathways initiative for your commitment to creating a better future for all young people through college and career pathways: Boys & Girls Club of Greater Memphis, Brooklyn STEAM Center, Career Connect Washington, CareerWise Colorado, HERE to HERE, Rush Education and Career Hub, YouthForce NOLA, Equal Measure, Mission Minded, and Square Button.

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About Building Equitable Pathways

This work, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to provide youth with the information and support they need to make informed choices for their futures—especially young people of color who have too often been denied access to these key resources. The goal is to dramatically increase the number of young people, ages 14 to 24, who are Black, Latinx, or experiencing poverty, who have the agency, social capital, skills, and credentials needed to thrive in the workforce and in life. A deep commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion stands at the heart of this initiative. http://www.jff.org/equitablepathways

Table of Contents

Introduction

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood can be challenging. Young people are trying to answer the essential question, "Who am I?" while also grappling with wondering, "Who can I become?" The answers to these critical questions of selfhood converge upon occupational identity, defined by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Equitable Futures initiative as "how young people envision their future selves in the workforce, what they like to do, what they believe they are skilled at, and where they feel they belong." Ideally, it is through work that people engage in personally meaningful activity and achieve economic mobility.

However, developing an occupational identity does not happen in a vacuum. It is deeply influenced by an individual's family, community, and school, and also by social, political, and historical contexts. In 2020, many young people are aware that racial and economic inequities are part of a larger system that denies opportunity and career choice to youth of color. Young people have great capacity to be change agents, and adults who support and guide them should work to understand their perspectives on how to combat racial and economic injustice.

Purpose of This Resource

The purpose of this document is to identify guiding principles that intermediary staff members and leaders can use to support equitable career outcomes for youth—particularly Black and Latinx youth and young people experiencing poverty. Intermediary organizations—sometimes known as backbone organizations or community quarterback organizations—play a key role in developing, brokering, and leveraging relationships to support equitable pathways so that young people and their families are not left to go it alone. Intermediaries are responsible for coordinating education resources and processes to bring about clear paths that lead to certification, college credit, degrees, or credentials, and, ultimately, to strong labor market outcomes. They are often industry associations, community colleges, workforce boards, chambers of commerce, and community-based organizations.

We have identified four principles that are imperative for helping intermediary organizations to design strategies for effectively supporting and engaging with youth. These principles are to: apply best practices that support the most marginalized, focus on youth assets, build cultural competence, and enable youth to exercise self-advocacy.

Gaps in Career Advising

For youth of color, particularly those who are experiencing poverty, choosing a career can be especially challenging. While most families experiencing poverty have high aspirations for their children, as most other families do, they often lack the experience and information necessary to help their children explore and prepare for a career. For this reason, school counselors are a primary source of information and advice. Research shows that Black students are more likely than white students to identify counselors as very important to their decisions about postsecondary education.

Unfortunately, many schools do not have a sufficient number of counselors to effectively serve their students. The recommended counselor-to-student ratio is one counselor to 250 students; however, the actual national ratio is one counselor for 482 students. According to a state-by-state analysis from the Education Trust, 38 states have inadequate counselor-to-student ratios and are "short changing students of color or low income students or both." In addition, counselors who serve predominantly students of color have even higher student-to-counselor ratios than their peers in schools that serve predominantly white students. As the Education Trust observes, "Students of color and students from low-income families have been overlooked and underserved for far too long. If anything, they deserve more access to school counselors than their peers—not the same, and certainly not less."

Over decades, students of color, students experiencing poverty, and students with disabilities were tracked or counseled into vocational programs that all too often resulted in low-wage jobs that offered little-to-no opportunity for career advancement. Today, many vocational programs—now called career and technical education (CTE)— provide up to date and wide-ranging career preparation programs. And students in CTE programs go to college at the same rate as their peers. However, evidence suggests that some tracking still occurs, with higher rates of white and Asian students concentrating in high-paying career areas like STEM and higher rates of Black and Latinx students in lower-paying areas such as construction and manufacturing. One possible reason for the lower rates of Black and Latinx youth in STEM is that they may opt out of attractive career options to avoid anticipated workplace racism. This is particularly true for fields that lack racial diversity—a problem in many well-paying occupations. As a result, counselors and other adults who work with youth should acknowledge and address these issues directly with young people and encourage youth to enter higher-wage fields well informed.

Equity Is the North Star

College and career pathways are a strategy to address these challenges and bring about more equitable workforce outcomes for youth who face racial and economic marginalization. Career pathways are strategically structured educational sequences that begin in high school and lead to college credits, industry credentials, and associate's or bachelor's degrees in high-demand, high-wage fields. Students also have multiple opportunities to explore careers in these fields, including work-based learning.

Pathways help families to focus on the key transition points across education (for example, from high school to postsecondary) and the workforce. Once students choose a career pathway, the steps to complete the required education and find a good job in their chosen field are laid out for them, and they receive support through each transition. Pathways also help young people and families manage the costs of higher education by earning college credits for free through opportunities such as dual enrollment or early college high school.

When an intermediary holds equity as its north star, its organizational values and priorities are codified into all decision-making processes. A deep commitment to equity allows intermediaries to examine how programmatic decisions are aligned (or not) with equitable outcomes. This begins at the board and senior levels and means that from top to bottom, the organization adopts an antiracist and equity-centered approach. This approach goes beyond improving organizational practices alone and includes influencing the practices of industry partners with which youth are placed for work-based learning.

Overall, equity-focused intermediaries view youth in terms of their individual strengths. Youth are not broken vessels that must be fixed for the labor market; they are eager learners who bring energy, valuable life experiences, and thoughtfulness to companies that are open to welcoming them. They have dreams and aspirations for a good life that must be honored. Equity-focused intermediaries and the employers they partner with for work-based learning programs also see themselves as just as much in need of learning and self-reflection as the young people they interact with. That is why it is important that all understand and employ research-proven principles of youth development in their work.

It is important that the intermediary has a culture of learning and growth that touches all employees at all levels. This "growth" orientation, where it is OK to fail, is essential for intermediaries whose leadership and teams are primarily white and middle class and serve in communities of color that are experiencing poverty. Creating such a culture diminishes the stigma and shame associated with making mistakes. Most importantly, it normalizes failure and

growth as part of the process by which organizations effectively pursue their mission. It presupposes that adults in the organization have a lot to learn.

The Four Principles

1. Apply Best Practices That Support the Most Marginalized

The most marginalized populations require and deserve cutting-edge, state-of-the-art career readiness strategies. And yet, youth from marginalized communities are often supported *with great care, yet limited rigor*.[1] That is, many of the adults with whom the youth interact are warm and supportive but may have low expectations around academic achievement and future career success. Workforce development strategies that are considered best practices have often proven effective for a specific population, while also producing positive outcomes for all. That is, serving the most vulnerable populations well does not necessarily come at the detriment of others.

For example, one best practice is to use labor market information (LMI) to drive decision making. As intermediaries work to build pathways into high-demand, living-wage jobs, LMI provides a way to evaluate available opportunities and determine whether existing workforce programming is aligned with current and future labor market demands. Intermediaries can view local demand and respective earnings for different jobs in their region. Additionally, they can compare regional job demand and earnings with national demand. But it's not enough for a job to be in high demand—demand and earnings must be considered together. People of color are overrepresented in jobs that are in high demand but provide low wages. It is important for intermediaries to use LMI to identify pathways to "good jobs"—jobs that provide a living wage and opportunities for career advancement. But of course, best practices can and should be modified to fit the particular needs of the local community.

There may be instances when youth are balancing very real and pressing economic circumstances and need to find a job—any job—immediately. Helping youth to get what Burning Glass Technologies calls "lifeboat jobs"—those that fill an immediate need—is an important first step. While many lifeboat jobs do not lead to opportunities to earn high wages or advance, some will allow young people to develop skills that are transferable to other occupations and are needed for their future long-term careers. Intermediaries can help young people be strategic about finding such jobs. However, to promote the level of individual and systemic change needed to achieve economic advancement young people must be able to access long-term, "lifetime jobs," which pay a family-supporting wage and help a young person build a secure foundation. Adult advisors can help youth to understand the differences between job

openings, what constitutes a career ladder, and how to identify skills and opportunities that will open doors to economic advancement.

Reflection Questions

LMI data allow intermediary organizations to answer important questions:

- What do the pathways your organization offers communicate to youth about your expectations for their career paths?
- Do your LMI criteria focus on any job or "good jobs" that provide opportunity for career or professional growth in the local economy?
- Do your pathways improve diversity and equity or do they recreate racial segmentation in the labor market?
- Are there gaps between your aspirations and practices and how you should align pathways to good jobs? If there are gaps, what steps are you taking to adjust your expectations for young people and to ensure that your pathways lead to good jobs?
- How do you know that the strategies your organization uses are effective (or likely to be effective)?

Spotlight: From Available Jobs to Good Jobs

Boys & Girls Club of Greater Memphis is using LMI to revise its thriving culinary arts program. The annual pay for food service workers in the Memphis region is $21,950, well below a living wage for one adult and one child. Through a review of LMI data, the organization discovered that there is growing demand for large batch food preparers. The annual salary for this profession is $37,610, nearer the living wage. Boys & Girls Club of Greater Memphis is exploring how to revise the existing culinary program to develop a pathway into the higher paying culinary career. It is also reevaluating and readjusting other career pathways training it offers.

2. Focus on Youth Assets

Young people possess remarkable assets—supports and strengths—and potential. It is important for intermediary organizations to recognize the value that youth bring to learning in both educational and work-related settings. While focusing on assets is beneficial for all youth, it is particularly important for youth of color and those from other marginalized communities. For example, when envisioning future career possibilities, youth of color often engage in conscious

and unconscious mental calculations. They appraise how careers align with their interests and assets (personal and social). For example, a recent study from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Equitable Futures initiative found that when Black and Latinx youth transitioned to college, they worried about "near-term obstacles to [college] access," such as the costs, barriers of inequality, and the risk of dropping out. Their white peers, on the other hand, were more focused on "future-oriented career success" and landing "dream jobs." Youth of color also calculate whether the prestige, salary, and educational requirements associated with a career are worth the effort needed to overcome barriers that are associated with that career.

The extent to which youth of color can envision themselves working in a career is largely influenced by the degree to which youth see people who share important aspects of their identities—such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion, among others—working in that career. Anticipated barriers and limited supports can prevent youth of color from pursuing careers that align with their interests and aptitude. Consequently, youth of color often choose nontechnical careers although they have the interest and ability to pursue technical careers. Intermediary staff can support youth in pursuing satisfying careers that pay well and feel meaningful to them, even in fields where marginalized communities are underrepresented.

It is important for intermediaries to not only reject false stereotypes about youth of color, but to challenge the internalization and perpetuation of those stereotypes by those who work with youth. Young people benefit from discovering their personal assets as well as learning about the community-based assets they can call on to help overcome barriers. Intermediaries need to also be proactively anti-racist in their practices to ensure that students of color experience a culture of instruction and support that enables them to recognize and build on their assets to overcome the anticipated challenges associated with a career pathway.

Reflection Questions

- In what ways do we systematically identify and hold central the assets of young people?
- How do we systematically assist young people in identifying and building upon their assets?
- In what ways do our practices perpetuate or push back against racist or stereotypical thinking?
- How do we create space for youth voice and perspective?

Spotlight: The Words Adults Use About Youth

The language used to speak to and about communities is important and has power. It can contribute to marginalization and stereotyping, or it can center and uplift the voices of people within the community. HERE to HERE developed its Language Guide as a resource for "advocates, educators, employers, members of the media, and others to investigate the words they use when working with or for young people." The guide takes an asset-based approach to counter frequently used deficit-based language that devalues people of color, especially youth. The guide challenges intermediary staff to be aware of their own stereotypes and deficit assumptions and offers concrete advice about words and phrases to avoid and "words and phrases that depend on context, tone, and nuance."

3. Build Cultural Competence

Youth and organizations have their own language, dress, and norms. Cultural competence is the ability to understand, navigate, and honor the language, rules, and behaviors of a subgroup or organization. Intermediaries play a critical role in helping young people identify the appropriate cultural practices to use in different settings. This includes code switching—pointing out that there is one set of cultural expectations for language and behavior that is appropriate for socializing with friends and another set of cultural expectations for work. It also includes helping youth recognize that cultural competence involves more than understanding the jargon of a field or how to behave at work, but also understanding the hidden rules of a workplace context.

The burden of adapting behaviors and norms to what is considered appropriate in a particular professional setting should not be entirely on the young person. Intermediaries should work with their employer and education partners in work-based learning and internship experiences to create opportunities for bidirectional feedback and use it to create a more welcoming work environment. The balance here is to frame the appropriateness of specific work behaviors while at the same time not reinforcing or upholding an exclusionary work culture.

Though it may be a harder message to sell while attempting to create work-based learning opportunities, employers also need support around cultural competence. Developing cultural competencies to address the needs of an increasingly diverse talent pool is a growth opportunity for large and small businesses alike. Thus, intermediaries have a responsibility to work with

employers to build a work environment that is welcoming to individuals from diverse backgrounds, including young people. In addition, the research is clear that having a workforce that is diverse along many lines of identity has a positive impact on the bottom line.

Reflection Questions

- In what ways does a dominant culture or set of norms influence or create tension for students in career pathways programs?
- Are there opportunities for young people to speak to their cultural practices in building their skills and competencies in the career pathway program?
- In what ways do your career pathways decenter a dominant culture in pedagogy or curriculum?
- How do you openly discuss code switching and the role of context in shaping behavior and perception?

Spotlight: 'Two-Way' Workforce Preparation

Expectations for "acceptable" behavior depend on context (e.g., social vs. professional). However, just because a behavior is not suited for work settings does not mean it is out of place elsewhere. The ability to recognize the cultural expectations of different contexts is a skill that young people can develop. CareerWise Colorado's customer success managers (CSMs) have two customers—the student and the business providing the apprenticeship. The organization helps both to prepare for an apprenticeship experience. CSMs help apprentices learn and practice work-appropriate behaviors. They work with employers to train supervisors and mentors to ensure their readiness to support a diverse apprenticeship pool, including managing cultural, gender, and generational differences. This is especially important in career fields that are traditionally white and male, such as advanced manufacturing and IT. This dual focus builds the work competence of youth and the cultural competence of industry.

4. Enable Youth to Exercise Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is the ability to frame and engage in emotionally intelligent communication (oral and written) to demonstrate your value. In this context, young people who speak up for themselves or speak out against inequality may also bring about change that promotes more equitable treatment in the workplace. While this is an important skill for individuals of any age,

it is critically important for adolescents and young adults as these periods set the foundation for work experience over their lifetimes.

Unfortunately, it is not a matter of if a person of color will encounter discrimination at the workplace, it is a matter of when. According to Glassdoor's Diversity and Inclusion Study 2019, 61 percent of adult workers in the United States have witnessed or experienced some form of workplace discrimination. Similarly, 42 percent of U.S. workers have witnessed or experienced racism. The Glassdoor study also states that "younger employed adults are more likely to experience or witness some form of discrimination at work than their older peers." Racism is a deeply embedded structural feature of work that adversely impacts the workforce participation and mobility of people of color, particularly for the Black community.[2]

Given the high probability that youth of color will encounter bias and racism in the workplace, intermediaries have a duty not only to discuss these challenges in the abstract but also to explicitly help youth build their capacity to identify and address these challenges. Some intermediary staff members may be both unprepared and unfamiliar with holding conversations regarding the inequities of systems from which they directly benefit, especially those who hold privileged identities. If systems are going to develop the capacity of youth to recognize and self-advocate in response to inequity, systems must develop capacity among practitioners to simultaneously listen, learn, and lead regarding racial equity. In addition to examining systems of racism with young people, intermediaries can also model the roles allies can take on in attacking workplace discrimination.

Reflection Questions

- How do you build systemic capacity to equip youth to respond appropriately to racism, including race-based microaggressions in the workplace?
- What is your approach to having conversations with employers about prejudice and organizational culture?
- What opportunities or structures exist for youth to provide feedback about their work-based learning experience?

Spotlight: Ten Questions About Race for Workforce Programs

Discussions of race and racism are essential parts of building workforce capacity that are often ignored in training programs. Associated Black Charities, a Black-led public foundation in Baltimore, helps intermediaries develop skills and capacity to address issues of race—particularly structural racism. When applied, their Ten Essential Questions for Workforce Development ensure that program efforts lead to racial equity. The ten questions are framed around three ways that solutions produce equity: solutions are systemic, race explicit, and outcome-oriented. Associated Black Charities' goal is "that every professional involved in workforce development will begin each aspect of his or her work by examining the ten essentials questions."

Conclusion

There is still more for intermediaries to do to promote equitable career outcomes for youth. The four principles of practice introduced in this resource are not exhaustive; instead, they are offered, alongside the spotlights and additional resources, as a provocation and as supports for the journey to build equitable pathways systems. They are a lens for viewing the intermediary's work and to reflect on the ways an intermediary is breaking down or upholding systemic barriers to success for young people who are Black, Latinx, or experiencing poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic downturn of 2020 have further exacerbated many longstanding racial inequities—and their full impacts are yet to be seen. However, with increased societal focus and will to address injustice and an upsurge of youth activism, this moment also presents an opportunity to promote positive change.

Intermediaries should seize this unprecedented time to examine how their policies and practices promote—or impede—equitable outcomes for young people from marginalized communities. As the connector within a pathways ecosystem, intermediaries are uniquely positioned to facilitate the reimagining and creation of equitable pathways systems that truly support *all* youth in succeeding in college and careers. To bring this shared vision to life, they must intentionally commit to focusing on racial justice and equity in every aspect of their work.

Learn More

- The American Psychological Association's Discrimination: What It Is, and How to Cope webpage defines discrimination and outlines some of its negative mental health effects and how an individual can address them.
- Youth@Work, the U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's website for youth in the workforce is designed to teach young people about their rights and responsibilities as an employee.
- Glassdoor's Diversity & Inclusion Study 2019 analyzes discrimination in workplaces across four countries, with striking differences between each, and how companies are responding.
- JFF's report When Is a Job Just a Job—and When Can It Launch a Career? provides a useful framework to identify the types of occupations that offer the strongest opportunities for financial stability and true economic advancement.

Endnotes

[1] Jean E. Rhodes, "The Road to Rigor," in *Older and Wiser: New Ideas for Youth Mentoring in the 21st Century,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

[2] Steven D. Brown et al., "Relationships Among Supports and Barriers and Career and Educational Outcomes: A Meta-Analytic investigation," *Journal of Career Assessment* 26, no. 3 (2018): 395-412, https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072717714537.