

YAWLA

**Young Adult Workforce
Landscape Analysis**

Workforce Practitioner Perspectives Brief

**WHAT YOUNG ADULTS NEED AND EXPECT FROM
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

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Introduction

Drawing on focus groups with workforce practitioners, this brief examines how programs serving young adults ages 18 to 29 are navigating today's workforce landscape. The findings come from the Young Adult Workforce Landscape Analysis (YAWLA), a mixed-methods study designed to understand how workforce organizations are responding to economic shifts and changing workforce conditions.

This overview focuses exclusively on insights from 20 focus groups involving 86 practitioners from 17 states and the District of Columbia, spanning all four major U.S. Census regions. To identify themes, we coded focus group transcripts using both deductive (top-down) and inductive (bottom-up) approaches. In practice, this meant starting with topics drawn from the focus group questions and existing knowledge about workforce programs, while also capturing themes that emerged directly from practitioners' responses, including insights that were unexpected or not explicitly asked about.

Together, these findings offer a national snapshot of workforce practitioners' perspectives on what young adults want and expect from work and from workforce development programs. The themes that follow reflect practitioners' insights on young adults' priorities—such as flexibility and stability, clear and meaningful pathways into work, access to mental health and employability supports, relationship-based guidance, and opportunities to explore a range of career options—and how programs are responding to these expectations in practice.



Key Themes

Young adults increasingly want and expect more from the world of work. They want more from their work lives and are resistant to poor treatment in the workplace, perhaps more so than prior generations. Flexibility, including the ability to decide their hours, work more hours to earn more pay, and work remotely, are of high importance. At the same time, young adults desire stability – adequate pay and benefits and the ability to predict their schedules – alongside flexibility. Young adults also want to contribute. They seek opportunities to have a positive impact through their work and to have a voice in improving their workplaces. They also want to connect with others, including working in teams.

Practitioners view young adults' desire for more in their work lives and careers as a positive development. They described young adults as full of hustle and determination, and as people who want to make a difference. Several practitioners emphasized that young adults have the potential to drive change in the workplace in ways that could ultimately benefit all generations of workers. As one self-described Gen X practitioner noted,

"I think this younger generation is definitely going to go to a 4-day, 32-hour work week, and I think that's just the way it's going to be—like most of us. And I don't mean, I'm speaking for myself. I don't want to go back to what it was, where you have to be in this office, and you have to do this, and you have to do that. We work from multiple places, so I think that that's the change in the workforce. Over the last five years, that's what we're seeing. It's just not going to go back. I actually don't want it to go back."

One way some programs described meeting young adults where they are is by adapting education and training pathways to better support entrepreneurial interests. Practitioners noted that, in some cases, programs sequence pathways so young adults can first stabilize through employment while continuing to build skills or earn credentials aligned with longer-term entrepreneurial goals. This has included adding or redesigning pathways in areas such as entrepreneurship, business services, cosmetology, and drone piloting, as well as creating opportunities for alumni upskilling or business incubation alongside job placement.

Growing mental health needs among young adults are a major shift shaping workforce programs, compounding the need for social-emotional learning after COVID-19.

When asked to reflect on the changes over the past five years that have most affected their work with young adults, practitioners consistently pointed to the growing need for mental health services and social-emotional learning. They described higher levels of anxiety, depression, and substance use among young adults, with some attributing these trends to learning loss and educational disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Practitioners emphasized that mental health needs are not confined to program intake or classroom settings. These needs show up during programming, once young adults are placed in work-based learning opportunities such as externships, and after program completion. Some programs have responded by addressing mental health as an immediate need through in-house staff, including social workers or behavioral health specialists, requiring programs to operate beyond their traditional scope. One practitioner shared,

“The biggest change is the mental health support. So, we hired a full-time behavioral health specialist on our staff. We aren’t necessarily known as direct service practitioners, but we do dabble, and so it was essential to have somebody on the team that had that expertise... because, again, I’ve been doing this for decades... this generation is different.”

For longer-term support, programs described connecting young adults with community partners to provide continued mental health support after participants exit workforce programs.

Relatedly, practitioners noted that, tied to the pandemic, virtual learning during formative years, learning loss, and regular phone use, young adults need greater social-emotional learning to strengthen communication skills and build confidence. Fortunately, programs have a strong practice of providing programming to develop young adults’ “soft skills,” better referred to as “employability skills.”

When asked to comment on the most important services they provide to young adults, practitioners described providing opportunities to develop these skills through trainings and structured models focused on executive functioning, communication, time management, workplace navigation, self-advocacy with peers and supervisors, critical thinking, resilience, and multiple forms of literacy, including digital, financial, and environmental literacy.

Pre-apprenticeships have become a core strategy for opening the door to work for youth and young adults. Programs are providing youth and young adults with access to various forms of work-based learning (WBL), including internships, registered apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, and exposure opportunities like in-person and virtual externships. At the same time, programs are facing challenges in consistently connecting youth and young adults to WBL experiences fostering their engagement and immersion in work.

For example, practitioners regularly described internships as important WBL opportunities that could lead to employment for an intern. However, internships have been challenging to sustain and grow with employers, with cuts in funding subsidizing internships and employers reluctant to take on interns and/or hire interns into full-time roles. In focus groups, the most promising internships described by practitioners were those implemented by workforce development organizations, including colleges and public employers, and those led and managed by corporations with the dollars to sustain them.

“We’ll go to industry partners that we have and ask them to host a student. It doesn’t work out nearly as often as we would like. Our organization ends up hosting the majority of our continuing internships... WE are actually piloting a program this year where we have acted as their employers. We have 11 team interns this year who we are working with on basic job skills... Then we spend a whole other year coaching them, and then they get placed with different employers the next summer, and we bring in a new round of new youths to come in and be our interns for the summer, for what we’re looking for for those employers in the next year.”

In this context, programs are relying on pre-apprenticeships as a key strategy. Programs across the country are implementing pre-apprenticeships that include an industry-recognized certificate or credential in fields like healthcare (including phlebotomy and certified nursing assistant [CNA] credentials), machining, pharmaceutical manufacturing, construction, and other fields.

“Through a partnership with the county, young people earn entry-level healthcare certifications and get jobs at leading institutions. They may start with a phlebotomy certification through a six-week program at a for-profit or nonprofit college, receive hands-on training through an apprenticeship partner, and then be placed into subsidized employment for six weeks. That can lead to on-the-job training, where they demonstrate soft skills and ultimately get hired permanently. A year later, many return for additional education using tuition reimbursement.”

Some pre-apprenticeships, including the one mentioned above in healthcare, are funded by WIOA and include a partnership with a registered apprenticeship program, industry-aligned training, hands-on learning, and access to supportive services. Others are industry-recognized pre-apprenticeship programs, focused more on connecting youth and young adults to industry-recognized credentials and WBL.

Pre-apprenticeships were described as especially important for youth participants, including those in grades 10–12, in keeping them connected to education, employment, and training. Practitioners shared that when youth can see a clear pathway to “moderate-wage jobs” that include education, training, and steady employment, they are more likely to stay engaged.

Young adults’ success in workforce programs depends on sustained, relationship-based support from navigators, case managers, career coaches, and similar frontline staff. Across focus groups, case managers and other frontline staff who work directly with young adults were regularly described as the single most important service organizations provide. Practitioners pointed to the strength of the relationships case managers build with young people and the coaching, mentorship, and ongoing support they provide to help young adults overcome life- and work-related barriers.

One promising way practitioners described supporting young adults who want more from work is by serving as “translators” between young adults and employers. In this role, case managers, navigators, and employer engagement staff help bridge expectations, clarify workplace norms, and coach both young adults and employers toward more transparent, supportive, and sustainable employment relationships.

Importantly, practitioners emphasized that case managers do not stop supporting young adults once they are placed in a job. Instead, they often stick with young adults after hire, helping them navigate challenges that arise in the workplace, such as adjusting to schedules, managing conflict with supervisors, or deciding how to respond when a job is not meeting expectations.

“Our case managers follow up for at least 6 months. They’re doing regular check-ins, follow ups. That’s the goal. I mean, a lot of it depends on the student. But as part of our model and our strategy, one of our strategic abilities is called Hope for Life. It means that individuals can connect with us and receive support from us throughout their career. Life, career, life, right? Their entire career track. What we mostly see is the sort of, the workplace behavior, the soft skills... that’s why they cannot maintain their jobs. So, it’s important to provide more of that support right along the way, not just only during the training program, but also once they have found work, really provide opportunities to continue to instill those skills. And yeah, making, yeah, making sure that they’re able to have that support here to maintain their network and remain in work.”

Practitioners described this continuity of support as critical to helping young adults persist, stabilize, and ultimately succeed in employment.

At the same time, practitioners noted that funding, staffing capacity, and grant restrictions often limit their ability to provide this level of ongoing support – particularly when young adults stop out of programs or once they are employed. These constraints can prevent organizations from maximizing their impact, even when practitioners know that continued case management would help young adults get “across the finish line.” Several practitioners described this tension as a significant challenge and one that underscores the need for more flexible, sustained funding to support relationship-based services over time.

Entrepreneurship is emerging alongside pathways like healthcare and IT as a top interest among young adults. While some young adults’ career pathway interests, such as healthcare and IT, remain stable, practitioners described growing interest in entrepreneurship and in work that connects to young adults’ lives on social media. Young adults are interested in a variety of pathways, but the two most often mentioned in our focus groups were entrepreneurship and healthcare.

Tied to their desire for more flexibility and a better quality of life, young adults want to be entrepreneurs because they want to be their own bosses and own their own businesses. Practitioners described young adults as interested in being independent contractors and freelancers and noted that, according to more than one practitioner, “they don’t want traditional job models.” This includes interest in jobs that connect to their lives on TikTok and other social media platforms.

Practitioners also talked about wanting to meet young adults where they are in terms of these interests, even as they noted that many young adults do not yet have the skills needed to pursue these pathways in ways that lead to paid, sustainable wages and long-term employment.

“I’ll be super transparent... I find that a lot of the young people that are in our programs actually don’t want traditional job models and are veering more entrepreneurial, and want the opportunity to create their own schedule or work a hybrid.”

In some instances, programs are meeting Gen Z where they are by engaging young adults’ entrepreneurial interests in conversations and programming. Several practitioners discussed helping young adults understand how the skills they gain in employment in professional services, skilled trades, hospitality, cosmetology, and technical fields can be used to build futures that include contracting, freelancing, and other business ownership opportunities.

Others mentioned shifting their programs to include more content on business incubation, while also noting that workforce funding does not support young adults’ interests in entrepreneurship.

As entrepreneurship emerges as a top interest, Gen Z misperceptions about pathways to good jobs have become more visible. Practitioners described that many young adults, including those who are disconnected or otherwise not in education, employment, or training (NEET), hold misperceptions about what kinds of education, employment, and training can help them secure employment and achieve upward mobility.

Young adults are often coming to workforce programs with misunderstandings about how education and training pathways can lead them out of poverty and into stable, living-wage careers. Some are unaware of

available pathways altogether: for example, pathways in advanced manufacturing. Others express a strong desire for employment and upward mobility but believed they could achieve these outcomes solely through self-employment, such as becoming a social media influencer or pursuing pathways like cosmetology or commercial trucking.

Practitioners also noted that young adults do not always realize what it takes to enter and persist in education and training pathways that lead to upward mobility. For many workers, this can mean showing up to work in person from 9-to-5, spending years in education or training (for example, to become a nurse), or accepting a lower initial salary with the understanding that there are opportunities for advancement over time. Practitioners noted that these perceptions can create tensions with workforce programs and the pathways they are designed to offer.

“We have a lot of young men and women who are interested in cosmetology, and the challenge there is that most of them become self-employed. Without W-2 earnings, that creates challenges in how we support and fund that type of training. At the same time, many of our young people are drawn to entrepreneurial endeavors more broadly—things like hair braiding, drone piloting, transportation, and mobility—and they want to be self-employed in those areas. We’re also navigating the realities of the gig economy. Never before has a young person been able to pull out their phone and see readily available, consistent six-figure earners who look like them. So, there’s this perception that becoming an influencer—or gaining followers—can lead to quick wealth without training or preparation. Helping young people balance that reality with the sensationalism of getting rich quickly is the challenge. We have to meet them where they are.”

A key way that programs are addressing misperceptions about career, education, and training pathways is using data and structured tools paired with intentional, relationship-based conversations.

Programs rely on data-informed and relationship-based approaches to match young adults with programs and job opportunities.

Practitioners are using various forms of data as inputs to match young adults with program and job opportunities. Practitioners described using formal intake processes, career inventories, skills surveys, and pre-surveys to better understand young adults’ interests, strengths, readiness, qualifications, timelines, and local opportunities across industries such as IT, healthcare, and the trades. Reviewing these results one-on-one allows programs to ground aspirations in clearer information while supporting more tailored guidance and maintaining flexibility through referrals, waitlists, and follow-up as options and circumstances evolve.

Programs also described using a variety of inputs, including data and structured tools, to match young adults with employers and employment opportunities in ways that align with their interests, values, and circumstances. One practitioner described how their program blends structured tools with labor market data to support better matches and improve retention:

“We do a matching exercise. So, we use ONET because it’s free, and as you know, funding is really tight these days. And we actually have them draw out a Venn diagram where it shows what their values are, what their ONET results are, and then the careers that they’re interested in, and actually have them put, in the center, where that all lines up. We have found for us that has really increased retention and engagement, because we can always go back to that. And then for pairing young adults

with employers, we use Lightcast data to project both openings and replacements to see, specifically in our county, what is going to be in demand. We also added a layer of information about high-skill and high-wage occupations as a way to analyze any positions or industries they're interested in."

Practitioners also described conducting assessments that involve career staff working directly with young adults to understand what they want from their work, careers, and education and training pathways. Programs collect data from employers – often through online surveys – and draw on labor market information (LMI) and industry data to support employer engagement and matching. Many programs described working closely with the workforce development system to connect young adults to available opportunities.

Relationships also matter greatly to matching young adults to opportunities within workforce programs. Young adults most often connect to workforce programs through trusted institutions and relationships. Practitioners described strong referral pathways through K–12 schools, community colleges, training centers, and other community-based organizations and partners. One practitioner described how close partnerships with community colleges help programs identify and support students early, particularly those who may be struggling.

"We have a really great relationship with the community colleges. And so, the instructors actually refer students to us as kind of a first line of defense. They know the students that are in their program. If they see someone struggling... in fact, we actually present at every orientation for the nursing program, because we know it's a 2-year long program, and we want them to know that our services are available."

In some cases, workforce organizations are embedded directly into college onboarding processes – for example, presenting at orientations for longer-term programs like nursing – to ensure students are aware of available supports from the outset. Several practitioners also noted that they are increasingly using social media to reach and recruit young adults, too.

Programs engage employers through a continuum of involvement that allows for different levels and types of participation. Programs utilize a variety of methods to engage employers in supporting Gen Z employment. Practitioners described using some engagement activities, such as mock interviews, job fairs, resume reviews, and related activities, to build relationships with local employers. Programs also partner with employers to place interns as a trial run. These less formal and less extensive engagements, in terms of time or financial commitment, were described as opportunities to build influence with employers and to onboard them toward greater involvement over time.

Practitioners also mentioned engaging employers as training partners and pursuing deeper engagement by providing resources such as coaching and success stories. To identify employers for deeper engagement and full, strategic partnership, programs use criteria, particularly prioritizing industries with hiring needs and employers who “get it” when it comes to working with young adults, especially those who are new to the workforce, justice- or violence-impacted, and/or living with disabilities. Infrequently, practitioners described setting minimum pay requirements, though many noted working with employers to structure otherwise meaningful experiences for young adults.

Practitioners described organizing these methods into clear levels of engagement and meeting employers

where they are, rather than expecting the same type or depth of involvement from every employer. As one practitioner explained:

“We have five levels of employers that we classify them in now, in these buckets... so we classify every employer at a level, and we meet them at that level where they are. So, if all the interest they have is in reviewing resumes for our graduates, then that’s Level 1, right? They don’t have the capacity to move beyond that. It’s not that we’re trying to convert every Level 1 into a Level 5, but if we can, we will. Level 5 is full strategic engagement. They are a partner who really is able to say, this is the work [of our program]. They’re willing to bring in their employees, financially contribute, loan equipment, or provide space for training.”

Across focus groups, practitioners emphasized that programs engage employers most effectively when employer relationships are someone’s full-time job. Practitioners consistently identified having staff whose roles are dedicated to employer engagement as the most important method for sustaining and deepening employer involvement. Programs employ staff in roles such as job developers, employment specialists, employment connections team members, career and placement services managers, employer coordinators, and business development or sales staff focused on building and sustaining employer partnerships.

Practitioners described these roles as critical because they serve as the primary bridge between workforce programs and employers. Some roles are dedicated to identifying job opportunities for program participants, maintaining ongoing relationships with employers, and helping ensure that placements align with both employer needs and young adults’ interests and circumstances. They play a key role not only in successful job placement, but also in supporting job retention by troubleshooting issues that arise after hire and helping employers better understand and work with young adults.

“We have a student who’s interested in veterinary medicine. Our job developer has talked with a veterinarian who has agreed to let our student come to the hospital for a day to... see the animals... assess to see what’s going on... that’s a big step for us. I think placements can be successful if the relationship and the follow up and the intention and the work [are happening]. And then you have your program or your job developer. We’re constantly trying to make things better. But sometimes it always doesn’t work out either for the student for us. And sometimes the employee is like. Hmm! I don’t think it’s a good fit for us.”

Others, including those focused on business development, work with employers to address common challenges, including converting internships into full-time roles, supporting transitions from intern to employee, and encouraging skills-based hiring, including helping employers recognize the value of competencies and non-degree credentials alongside degrees.

Concluding Thoughts: Funding as a Defining Condition

The focus groups informing this brief were conducted in 2025, in the midst of tightening public resources, shifting philanthropic priorities, and increased scrutiny of workforce and equity-focused investments. Practitioners described operating in an increasingly constrained funding environment characterized by short grant cycles, rigid requirements, and performance metrics that often fail to reflect the realities of supporting young adults along non-linear pathways to employment and stability.

Across focus groups, practitioners consistently emphasized that funding shapes what programs can offer young adults, how long they can provide support, and how success is defined. Public resources were widely described as “drying up,” and federal funding as highly rigid. Practitioners also noted that increased scrutiny of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts has made securing and using funds more difficult, contributing to uncertainty about which activities, populations, or language funders will support. As a result, funder-defined metrics often feel misaligned with the work of serving young adults and with what it takes to improve their circumstances, experiences, and outcomes.

Several practitioners stressed the need for greater flexibility in how success is defined and measured, noting that meaningful progress for young adults often looks different from one individual to another and does not align with narrow or short-term outcome measures. As one practitioner shared:

“I want to reiterate something—this focus on outcomes and defining what the outcomes are. I think we just need more flexibility in what a successful outcome is, and what that means. Because each outcome is not a box that each young person fits into so neat and clean. What a successful outcome might be for one young person is really different from what a funder’s outcome might be, and then the funding is all tied to that, which is challenging. We need flexibility in funding and a conversation about, ‘What should an outcome look like for your program? What does your program need to make these things happen?’”

Relatedly, practitioners emphasized that meaningful progress for young adults often takes four to five years — not a 12-month grant cycle — and that expectations for rapid wage gains or job stability are often unrealistic. They stressed the need for multi-year funding paired with multi-year reporting that recognizes milestones such as housing stability, bridge employment, or enrollment in training, as legitimate indicators of success along the pathway to long-term self-sufficiency.

At the same time, practitioners cited the importance of philanthropic dollars, particularly funding that is more concept-driven and less “numbers-driven,” in advancing improvements in program quality and organizational capacity. Still, programs described a need for more funding overall, including more multi-year funding models, greater resources to sustain the range and intensity of services they offer (especially wraparound supports), and larger pools of funding to support collaborative approaches.

Taken together, these funding conditions shape both what workforce programs are able to do and how progress for young adults is understood across the field.

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