YAWLA

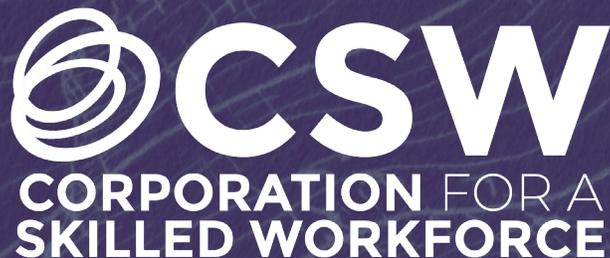## Young Adult Workforce Landscape Analysis

February 2026

RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A NATIONAL ANALYSIS OF YOUNG ADULT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS

CSW
CORPORATION FOR A SKILLED WORKFORCE

Report by Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

About Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW)

CSW is a national workforce policy and systems change nonprofit that partners with government, business, and community leaders to develop good jobs and the skilled workers to fill them. Since 1991, CSW has provided high impact strategic planning, program development, and evaluation assistance to state, regional, and local partners. We catalyze change in educational and labor market systems, policies, and practices to increase economic mobility, particularly for people of color and others historically excluded from economic success.

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Executive Summary

The current economic context for young people, especially those furthest from opportunity, is marked by instability, rising costs, and a narrowing margin for error. Inflation has driven up the cost of essentials like housing, transportation, food, and childcare faster than wages for entry-level and service-sector jobs, making it harder for young adults to achieve basic stability even when they are employed (Altman & Schrag, 2025; Deloitte Global, 2025). At the same time, employers have become more risk-averse amid economic uncertainty, posting fewer entry-level roles, raising experience requirements, and relying more heavily on contingent labor, automation, and AI for routine tasks (Levanon et al., 2025). For young adults facing structural barriers—such as justice involvement, housing instability, caregiving responsibilities, or interrupted education—these shifts compound long-standing inequities and make pathways into stable, quality jobs more fragile and nonlinear (Krauss et al., 2016).

In this environment, workforce practitioners are operating as both economic navigators and stabilizing forces. They are not only helping young adults access training and jobs but also buffering the impacts of volatile labor markets through relational support, career coaching, employer mediation, and connections to wraparound services. At the same time, practitioners are doing this work amid staffing shortages, short-term and restricted funding, rising caseloads, and growing expectations to document outcomes that the current system makes difficult to track (Scott et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2018; Redd et al., 2021; Moroney et al., 2025). Understanding how practitioners are situated and what tools, constraints, and adaptive strategies they have is critical to identifying what truly supports young adults' persistence and mobility and pinpointing the targeted investments and policy changes needed to increase practitioner impact and advance young adults' persistence and mobility.

The Young Adult Workforce Landscape Analysis (YAWLA), funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and implemented by the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), was launched to examine how workforce organizations serving young adults ages 18 to 29 are navigating this context. The study explores how the field has adapted in response to economic shifts, where promising practices are emerging, and where additional investment, policy change, or system alignment is needed to strengthen practitioners' ability to support young adults' long-term success.

To conduct this research, CSW used a mixed-methods design over seven months (March–October 2025). The study combined a national survey of 207 organizations across 44 states and Washington, D.C., with 20 focus groups involving 86 practitioners, 64 of whom had also completed the survey. The survey instrument was refined in collaboration with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and informed by prior landscape studies. Quantitative analysis focused on organizational capacity, services, employer engagement, funding patterns, and outcomes, while qualitative insights from focus groups provided deeper context and interpretation. Together, these methods produced a broad, representative portrait of the youth workforce landscape grounded in practitioner experience and field realities.

The analysis explores what drives strong outcomes for young adults, what barriers limit progress, and emerging innovation in the field. Coupled with existing research, the findings illuminate what workforce providers are doing today and the promise of certain strategies that may contribute to better results.

What We Learned

What's Working

Across hundreds of programs nationwide, organizations reported meaningful outcomes for young adults despite limited resources. Many described strong completion rates, effective skill-building strategies, and relational program models that supported young adults' academic, personal, and career advancement. Organizations that reported higher program outcomes most often emphasized relationship-centered case management, work-based learning, employer partnerships, and holistic supports such as mental health counseling, transportation assistance, and childcare. These strategies not only improve program retention but also help young adults secure full-time employment with wages above minimum standards and clear pathways for advancement.

What Systemic Barriers Are Challenging Impact

Most programs, including programs achieving meaningful outcomes for young adults, are challenged by system-wide barriers. Organizations cited limited staff capacity, fragmented or outdated data systems, uneven employer participation and limited long-term commitment,ent, rising mental health needs, and rigid or short-term funding structures as significant obstacles. Many reported difficulties tracking long-term outcomes because they lacked integrated data tools, staff time, or funding needed to maintain follow-up. Programs also face challenges tied to the administrative burden associated with funding, including narrow performance metrics that do not align with the realities of measuring year-over-year progress when working to support young adults.

What New & Innovative Approaches Are Being Used

Despite constraints, organizations are considering and testing new approaches. Organizations reported that they are increasingly embedding mental health supports, expanding entrepreneurship pathways, integrating employer co-design models, and exploring early uses of AI for career navigation and program efficiency. Some are building sector-based employer consortia, adopting shared metrics, and developing internal work-based learning opportunities to ensure paid experience for young adults. These shifts signal a willingness, across programs, to test new models that reflect labor market changes and youth aspirations.

Implications & Recommendations

Rather than signaling deficits, these findings surface opportunities to build on the strong foundations already in place and to better align practice, funding, and policy in support of young adults.

For Practitioners

- Further strengthen relationship-centered models.
- Embed wraparound supports.
- Deepen employer partnerships through co-design, structured feedback loops, and expanded work-based learning.
- Invest in shared metrics and data culture to better communicate impact and drive continuous improvement.

For Funders

- Stabilize the ecosystem by funding full costs of service delivery.
- Support data and digital infrastructure.
- Provide multi-year, flexible dollars that recognize long-term youth development cycles.
- Reward collaboration rather than competition by supporting consortia, shared services, and integrated systems-building efforts.

For Policymakers

- Modernize funding structures.
- Simplify reporting requirements.
- Adopt shared definitions and performance frameworks that reflect the realities of young adult progress.
- Strengthen cross-system data alignment.
- Create incentives for employer engagement, apprenticeship expansion, digital inclusion, and youth co-design in governance.

How to Use This Report

This report, produced by CSW, summarizes findings from a national survey and 20 focus groups conducted between June and September 2025. Participating workforce development organizations spanned a wide range of types, sizes, geographies, and funding structures, and collectively serve young adults ages 18–29, including those experiencing poverty, justice involvement, housing instability, and other structural barriers. Overall, the findings point to emerging patterns and promising trends that warrant deeper exploration.

The report is designed to support sensemaking, reflection, and decision-making across the young adult workforce development field. It is not intended to prescribe a single model or offer a checklist of solutions. Instead, it surfaces how organizations describe what is working, what is constraining impact, and how they are adapting to changing conditions, particularly as labor markets, funding environments, and young adults' needs continue to shift.

Readers are encouraged to use the report selectively and strategically. Practitioners may find it most useful as a reflection and planning tool; funders can use it to inform investment strategies and learning agendas; and policymakers can draw on it to better understand how policy and system design shape outcomes on the ground. Throughout the report, findings are grounded in the experiences of organizations working closest to young adults, with attention to variation across organizational contexts.

The report is organized around five core categories of topics:

1

SECTION 1: Research Participants
This section describes who participated in the research and the organizational contexts shaping the findings that follow. Readers can use this section to benchmark their own organization's size, staffing, service models, and funding context against those represented here and to identify patterns that may signal broader dynamics worth further investigation.

2

SECTION 2: What's Working in Young Adult Workforce Development
Rather than serving as a checklist of "best practices," this section offers examples of approaches that appear to support completion, placement, retention, and engagement across a range of contexts. Readers can use this section to identify effective practices and organizational conditions that are associated with stronger outcomes for young adults. Practitioners can reflect on which strategies align with their own capacity and population, funders can identify areas where continued or expanded investment may yield returns, and policymakers can see where current systems are enabling success.

3

SECTION 3: What's Holding the Field Back
This section surfaces the structural, operational, and systemic barriers that challenge organizational efforts to produce meaningful outcomes for young adults. Readers can use it to better distinguish between program-level challenges and system-level constraints, helping to avoid misattributing gaps in outcomes to program quality alone. For funders and policymakers, this section provides insight into where policy, funding, or infrastructure changes could remove friction and better support frontline work.

4

SECTION 4: New & Innovative Practices
Readers can use this section as a horizon scan of promising innovations and adaptations that organizations are beginning to test in response to changing labor markets and young adults' needs. These practices are not presented as proven solutions, but as signals of where the field is heading. Practitioners may find ideas to pilot or adapt, funders can identify areas ripe for experimentation and learning investments, and policymakers can anticipate where existing frameworks may need to evolve.

5

SECTION 5: Research Implications and Recommendations
This section translates the research findings into actionable strategies tailored to practitioners, funders, and policymakers. Readers can use it as a decision-support tool to guide planning, investment, and policy reform, with each recommendation grounded in evidence from the study and paired with a clear rationale and practical resources. Together, these recommendations point toward changes that can strengthen organizational capacity, improve system alignment, and increase young adults' access to meaningful, long-term economic opportunity.

Landscape Analysis Methods

To complete the landscape analysis, CSW used a mixed-methods research approach, inclusive of a national survey and followed by focus groups with practitioners. The project launched with the development of a national survey instrument informed by prior landscape analyses and refined in collaboration with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The survey was shared with organizations providing workforce development services to young adults ages 18–29.

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using SPSS and Excel to generate descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and frequency tables. This analysis, which comprises the basis of this report, focused on patterns in organizational capacity, services, employer engagement, funding, and outcomes.

To contextualize the survey findings, CSW also conducted focus groups with practitioners from youth- and young adult-serving workforce organizations. These sessions explored topics such as recruitment strategies, wraparound services, the role of case management, employer partnerships, young adult voice, and the realities of funding and policy constraints. Focus groups concluded in September 2025, and their insights were fully integrated into the analysis for this report.

Qualitative evaluation data were summarized manually for themes. Quotes in this report are presented with minor edits for clarity, grammar, and anonymity. In some cases, quotes were lightly synthesized or paraphrased to improve readability, preserve confidentiality, or better reflect the speaker's intended meaning when original phrasing was fragmented or unclear. All efforts were made to retain the original intent and tone of the speaker.

Limitations

As with any national landscape study, a few important considerations shape how these findings should be understood. First and foremost, because the sample size is limited, these results should not be interpreted as representing the entire field. However, we note areas where responses aligned strongly across organizations.

Second, the survey was voluntary, meaning that findings reflect only the organizations that elected to participate and may not represent the full national landscape. Variation in reporting practices and data capacity led to limited responses for some survey questions, including missing data or self-reported responses marked as "unknown" or "we do not collect this." As a result, the findings in this report should be interpreted as directional insights rather than definitive national benchmarks. They highlight opportunities for continued learning, deeper exploration, and potential field alignment.

Lastly, the interpretation of findings in this report reflects CSW's internal sensemaking process, informed by a team of workforce experts with decades of experience leading the Workforce Benchmarking Network, and as workforce practitioners and leaders. This expertise strengthens the rigor and practical relevance of our analysis, but it also means that the report is shaped by CSW's lens, including our approach to benchmarking as an action-oriented methodology. This influences how gaps, opportunities, and field-level patterns have been identified, and should be understood as an inherent part of our approach to analysis and reporting.

1 SECTION ONE

Research Participants

An overview of the organizations and practitioners who participated in the Young Adult Workforce Landscape Analysis (YAWLA) provides important context for findings that follow. Because workforce organizations differ widely in their missions, operating models, funding structures, and populations served, a clear picture of their characteristics is helpful for interpreting outcome data and identifying what effective performance looks like across diverse settings.

A Portrait of Participating Organizations

A total of 207 respondents completed the YAWLA survey, representing a broad cross-section of workforce development organizations across the United States. Eighty-six (86) workforce practitioners also participated in focus groups, sixty-four (64) of whom had completed the survey. Taken together, these participants reflect the diverse mix of organizations providing education, training, employment, and support services to young adults (see Table 1).

Location

Respondents represent 44 states, Washington D.C., and 6 organizations with a national footprint.

- The top four states responding to the survey include New York (31), California (23), Texas (22), and Washington (20).
- Focus group participants represented 21 states and Washington D.C. Sixty-four (64) focus group participants had also completed the research survey.

TABLE 1: LOCATIONS REPRESENTED BY SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS							
State (territory)	Count	State (territory)	Count	State (territory)	Count	State (territory)	Count
Alabama	2	Indiana	6	New Hampshire	1	Tennessee	4
Alaska	1	Kentucky	4	New Jersey	9	Texas	22
Arizona	11	Louisiana	8	New Mexico	3	Utah	1
Arkansas	2	Maine	6	New York	31	Vermont	1
California	25	Maryland	6	North Carolina	17	Virginia	3
Colorado	3	Massachusetts	13	North Dakota	1	Washington	20
Connecticut	1	Michigan	21	Ohio	10	West Virginia	4
Delaware	5	Minnesota	5	Oklahoma	3	Wisconsin	8
District of Columbia	1	Mississippi	3	Oregon	3	Wyoming	1
Florida	17	Missouri	5	Pennsylvania	17	None Specified	4
Georgia	9	Montana	6	Rhode Island	1	Nationwide	6
Illinois	10	Nevada	3	South Carolina	3		

Organization Type

The majority of participating organizations (n=207) identify as nonprofit or community-based organizations (104), followed formal workforce system entities (26) and by youth development organizations (22).

Geographic Scope

Thirty-six percent (36%) of responding organizations (n=205) serve a region that does not align with city, county or state boundaries.

- Fifty-five, or 27%, serve a specific city.
- Twenty-one percent (21%) provide services at the county level, and 17% at the state level.
- "Nationwide" was not an option for this survey question, but six (6) organizations noted a national presence when asked, "In which states does your organization deliver workforce services to young adults?"
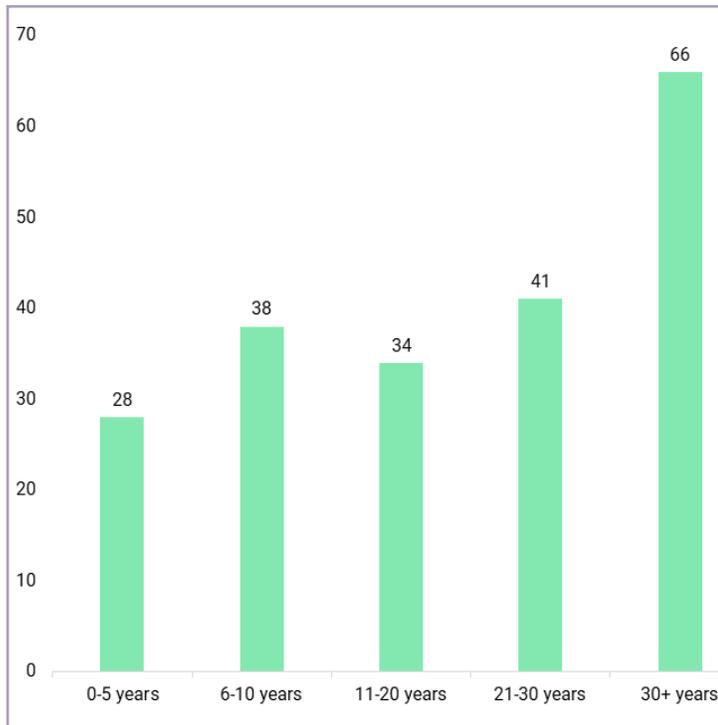
FIGURE 1: YEARS ORGANIZATIONS HAVE BEEN IN OPERATION (N=197)
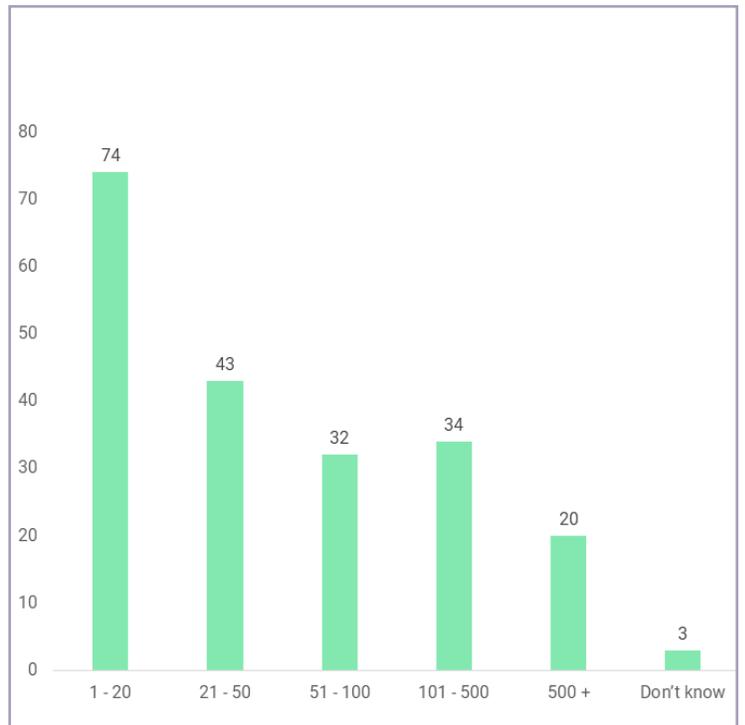
FIGURE 2: ORGANIZATION STAFF SIZE (N=206)

Years in Operation

The largest share of respondents work in organizations that have been operating for thirty years or more (n=197). There is a fairly even distribution among organizations that have operated for 21–30 years (21%), 11–20 years (17%), and 6–10 years (19%) (see Figure 1).

Organization Size

Over one third of respondents (n=206) work in organizations with 20 or fewer staff (35%) (see Figure 2). The remaining responses are spread across organizations with 21-50 staff (n=43), 51-100 staff (n=32), and 101-500 staff (n=34). Twenty organizations reported having more than 500 staff.

Number of Young Adults Served

Sixty-nine (69) organizations indicated they served 100-499 young adults annually (n=178). The next largest grouping is 1,000-4,999 (33 organizations). Roughly 12% (21) serve 1-49 young adults.

Organizations also serve a more diverse mix of ages; only 17% indicated that 81%-100% of the participants they serve fall within the ages of 18 to 29 (n=178).

Priority Participant Populations

More than half of respondents (58%, n=194) reported prioritizing a specific population in their program, such as by geography, education and employment status, and location (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: TARGET YOUNG ADULT POPULATIONS—SPECIFIC TARGET POPULATIONS (N=AT LEAST 73)

Target Population Categories	Frequency	Target Population Categories	Frequency
Asian	1	Lacking postsecondary credentia	2
Barriers to education/work	6	LGBTQIA+	1
Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color (BIPOC)	3	Low income/public assistance	12
Child of incarcerated parent	1	Mental health needs	3
College students	1	Migrant farm workers	1
Disconnected from school and work (opportunity youth)	13	Multiple language learners	1
Foster care	12	Native Americans, Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (AANHPI)	2
Girls and young women	2	Parenting young adults	4
High school stop outs (looking for diploma, GED, HISET)	10	Professional degree/graduate students	1
High school students (any)	1	Substance abuse/recovery	1
High school students (under credit)	2	Survivors of domestic violence	9
Historically underserved ("at promise and underserved")	3	Survivors of human trafficking	2
Housing insecure	11	Survivors of sexual abuse	1
Immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers	2	Underemployed	1
Individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities	13	Unemployed/underemployed	3
Justice involved	22	WIOA eligible	3

Program Funding

Only 34% of respondents (n=207) provided financial information for young adult employment services or programs in the most recent fiscal year. Federal funding is the most common funding source, but it is not the main source for organizations. Nearly half of organizations (47% or, 33 of 70) received between 26-75% of their budgets from federal dollars, indicating that while federal funding is significant, many organizations also rely heavily on state, local, or philanthropic funding to round out their budgets (see Table 3).

TABLE 3: ORGANIZATION FUNDING SOURCES

	Federal Funding (n=70)	State Funding (N=65)	Philanthropic Funding (n=65)	Corporate Funding (n=46)	Donations (n=50)	Fee for Service (n=27)	Other (n=22)
0% of Budget	6	8	3	5	6	5	2
1-25% of Budget	17	28	41	37	37	15	8
26-50% of Budget	16	22	12	1	2	4	4
51-75% of Budget	18	4	4	1	1	0	4
76-100% of Budget	11	4	3	1	1	2	2

SECTION TWO

What's Working in Young Adult Workforce Development

Workforce organizations serving young adults are accomplishing remarkable work, often with limited resources and in the face of significant structural challenges. Survey responses highlight that programs across the country are helping young adults build foundational and technical skills, complete training, and secure jobs that offer stability, wages above minimum standards, and pathways for advancement. These accomplishments speak to the dedication, expertise, and deep community relationships that define this field.

To understand what drives these results, this section begins by examining the characteristics of organizations reporting the strongest outcomes: those with higher completion, placement, and retention rates. Several shared characteristics emerged across these organizations, offering insight into how staffing, enrollment size, focus, and operational stability may contribute to stronger participant success. After an overview of these characteristics, this section turns to the services and supports that practitioners identified as most effective, providing a fuller picture of the strategies that help young adults persist, build skills, and transition into meaningful employment.

Section Two Key Takeaways

1   **Small and long-standing community-based organizations each play an important role in the young adult workforce ecosystem.** Smaller organizations can offer close, individualized support, and organizations with many years of experience bring strong community trust and consistent partnerships with employers.

2   **Strong completion outcomes are most common among smaller programs, which may benefit from smaller staff-to-participant ratios and caseloads.** These organizations maintain close contact with participants, enabling individualized support and better follow-up.

3   **Employer engagement is a consistent feature of organizations with the highest retention.** Dedicated employer engagement staff, employer participation in hiring, and universal access to internships or apprenticeships lead to stronger employment outcomes.

4   **Organizations achieving higher job placement rates often connect participants to full-time roles and wages above the minimum wage.** This focus on job quality strengthens long-term stability and career progression.

5   **Mental health support, in addition to basic needs assistance, has become central to young adults' ability to stay engaged and succeed in workforce programs**, but challenging for workforce organizations to provide due to demand and limited or restrictive funding.

Characteristics of Organizations Reporting Higher Outcomes

Before exploring the practices in use to support young adult success, it is useful to understand how organizations are performing today. Survey results show that workforce organizations are helping young adults achieve meaningful outcomes. Most programs participating in this research reported strong completion rates, with many placing participants in full-time jobs that pay above minimum wage, and in some cases at or above a living wage.

About Organizations Reporting Program Completion Rates

Among organizations responding, 78% (n = 172) reported completion rates that are between 61% and 100%, suggesting that many young adults who enroll in programs successfully finish them (see Figure 3).

Organizations reporting higher program completion outcomes (81%-100% of program participants) share several distinguishing characteristics: smaller annual enrollments, fewer staff, operational stability, and a primary focus on young adult populations (see Table 4).

TABLE 4: CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIZATIONS WITH 81-100% OF YOUNG ADULTS COMPLETING PROGRAMS

Measure	Finding	Percent
Number of Staff (n=78)	Staff size between 1-20	38%
Years in Operation	In operation for 30 years or more	41%
Number of Young Adults Served Annually (n=71)	Serve between 1 and 999 adults annually	68%
Percent of Participants Age 18-29 (n=75)	Young adults represent 81% to 100% of the population served	24%

In our experience, these traits may allow for smaller staff-to-participant ratios and a deeper focus on young adults, supporting stronger relationships, more personalized guidance, and services tailored to young adults' specific needs. Continued investment in organizational capacity can enable organizations to achieve positive, strong participant outcomes.

About Organizations Reporting Job Placement Rates

Over half of organizations (54%, n=172) that track job placement rates for program completers or graduates reported average placement rates above 61%. In addition, more than half of responding organizations (n=170) reported that young adults are placed into jobs that pay above the minimum wage (see Figure 3).

Across the 207 survey respondents, organizations reporting stronger job placement outcomes for program graduates or completers (81%-100% of program participants) tend to share several operational characteristics: moderate staff sizes, organizational longevity (comparative to other survey respondents), a
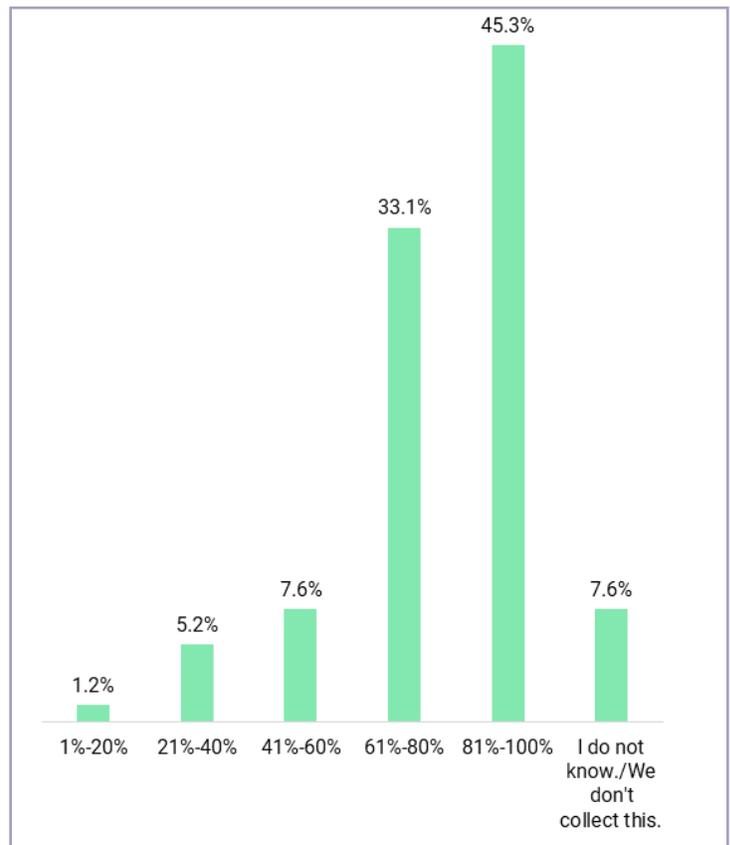
FIGURE 3: PERCENT OF YOUNG ADULT PARTICIPANTS COMPLETING WORKFORCE PROGRAMS (N=172)

focus on young adult participants, higher full-time placement rates, and competitive average wages (see Table 5).

Our experience suggests that these traits may contribute to closer staff engagement during placement, trusted employer relationships, and more intentional placement practices. Programs with moderate enrollment sizes may also be better positioned to balance personalized support while maintaining strong employer partnerships, while those primarily serving young adults can align job strategies with participants' needs and goals. Finally, organizations emphasizing full-time and/or well-compensated roles may focus on connecting participants to stable roles that offer consistent hours and clear advancement opportunities, highlighting the value of sustained employer partnerships and thoughtful job placement strategy.

Measure	Finding	Percent
TABLE 5: CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIZATIONS WITH 81-100% JOB PLACEMENT RATES FOR PROGRAM GRADUATES OR COMPLETERS		
Number of Staff (n=43)	Staff size between 1-20	42%
Years in Operation (n=43)	In operation for 21 years or more	51%
Number of Young Adults Served Annually (n=36)	Serve between 100-499 adults annually	53%
Percent of Participants Age 18-29 (n=40)	61% to 100% percent of young adults that fall between ages 18-29	35%
Full-time Job Placement (n=43)	At least 61% of young adults are placed into full-time jobs	77%
Average Wage (n=42)	Average wage is above minium wage	64%
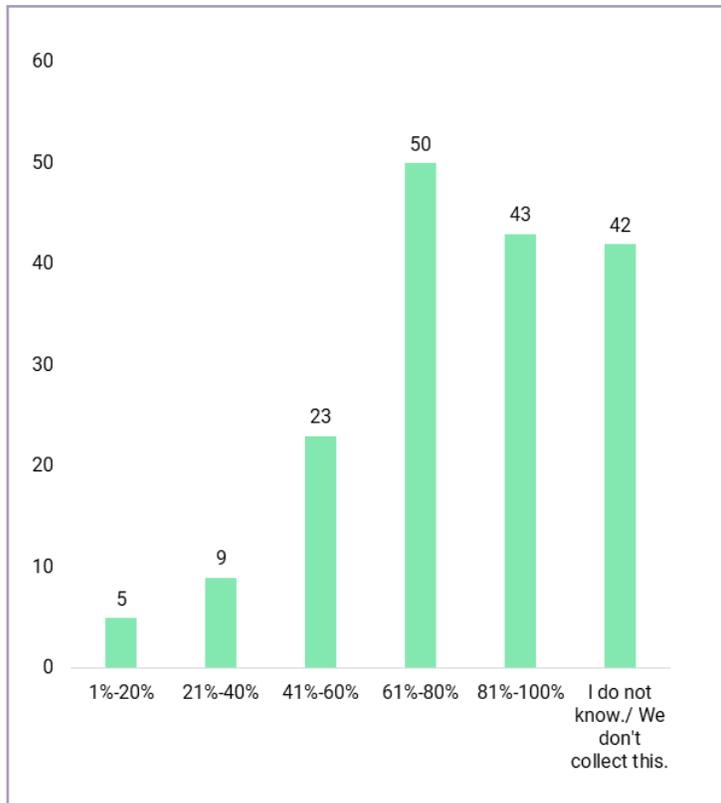
FIGURE 4: PLACEMENT RATE FOR YOUNG ADULTS GRADUATES OR PROGRAM COMPLETERS (N=172)

FIGURE 5: PLACEMENT WAGES FOR YOUNG ADULTS (N=170)

About Organizations Reporting Higher Job Retention (90, 180, and 365 Days)

Seventy-six percent (76%) of responding organizations (n=172) track job retention for young adults. Twice as many organizations that have operated for 30 years or more track participant retention rates than those operating between 21 and 30 years. This suggests that longer-established organizations may have stronger infrastructure, data systems, and institutional knowledge that support continuous learning and improvement
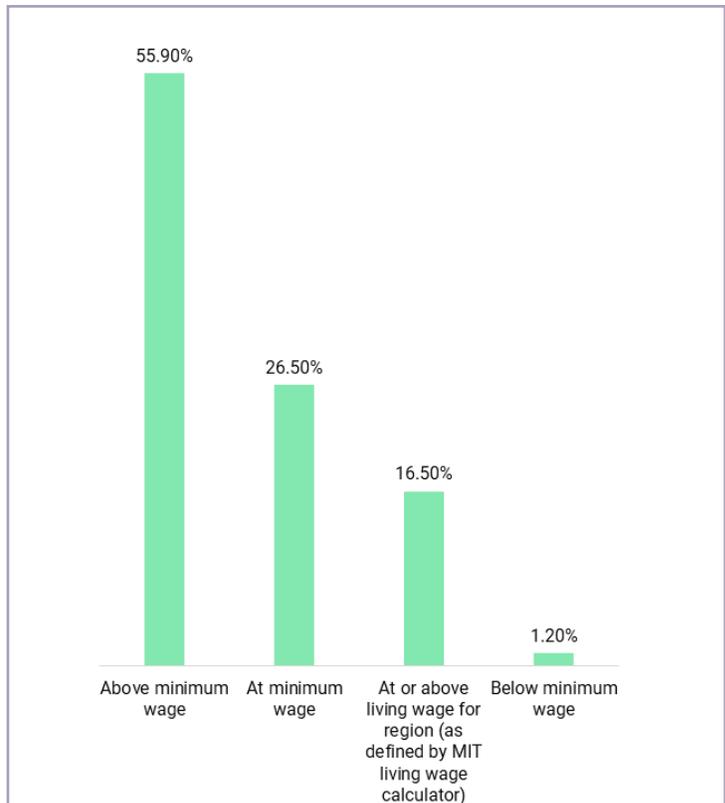
Among the limited subsets of survey respondents reporting higher job retention rates of 81%-100% of those placed are still working, several shared two characteristics that stand out: organizational longevity and smaller staff teams (see Table 6). While the sample is too limited to draw broad conclusions or identify firm trends, given our experience, we believe these patterns may indicate that long-standing organizations may have more consistent, structured retention processes, such as regular follow-up and communication with participants and employers. Similarly, smaller teams may support stronger internal coordination, allowing them to share information quickly and respond faster when participants face challenges in maintaining employment.

TABLE 6: RETENTION HIGH PERFORMANCE ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS (81-100%)			
Measure	**90 Days**	**180 Days**	**365 Days**
Years in Operation (n=21, n=13, n=10)	43% have operated for 30 or more years	46% have operated for 30 or more years	40% have operated for 30 or more years
Number of Staff (n=21, n=13, n=10)	43% have between 1-50 staff	46% have between 1-50 staff	60% have between 1-50 staff
Percent of Participants Ages 18 to 20 (n=20, n=12, n=9)	40% serve 81-100% of young adults	33% serve 81-100% of young adults	33% served 81-100% of young adults
Number of Young Adults Served Annually (n=20, n=12, n=9)	50% served 100 to 499 young adults annually	42% served 100 to 499 young adults annually	33% served 100 to 499 young adults annually

Together, these emerging insights suggest that close-knit teams and sustained participant engagement may support stronger long-term job retention; however, these findings should be interpreted cautiously given the small number of respondents in these groupings and other contextual factors—such as job quality or industry sector—that may also influence retention outcomes.

Common Practices Across Workforce Programs

Survey and focus group findings show that workforce organizations serving young adults offer a comprehensive set of services designed to support persistence, skill development, and successful transitions into employment. Programs commonly combine foundational education, such as high school credential attainment, with career coaching, case management, and work-based learning opportunities that help young adults become more competitive and connect to higher-quality jobs. Organizations also emphasize critical wraparound supports— including mental health services, housing assistance, transportation, and childcare—as essential for addressing basic needs and sustaining engagement through program completion and post-placement. This persistent combination of practices reflect a shared understanding across the field that employment success for young adults depends on integrating education, work-based experience, and holistic support.

FIGURE 6: MOST EFFECTIVE SERVICES PREPARING YOUNG ADULTS FOR EMPLOYMENT (N=137)

Most Effective Pre-Employment Services

Organizations that track effective workforce services rated career coaching and/or case management (91, n=137), job or work-readiness training or workshops (n=65), and critical thinking, problem solving (n=59) as the three most effective services in preparing young adults for employment (see Figure 6).

Services Beyond Workforce Development Programming

Organizations reported offering a range of supports beyond core workforce programming to address participant's immediate and long-term needs (n=204; see Figure 7). These supports include youth development, mental/health counseling and housing assistance. Most frequently cited services included:

- Youth development, such as mentoring and community services (133 mentions),
- Leadership development (99),
- Mental health/substance use counseling (65), and
- "Other" services (68) such as family support, reentry services, legal services, benefits counseling, and resource navigation.
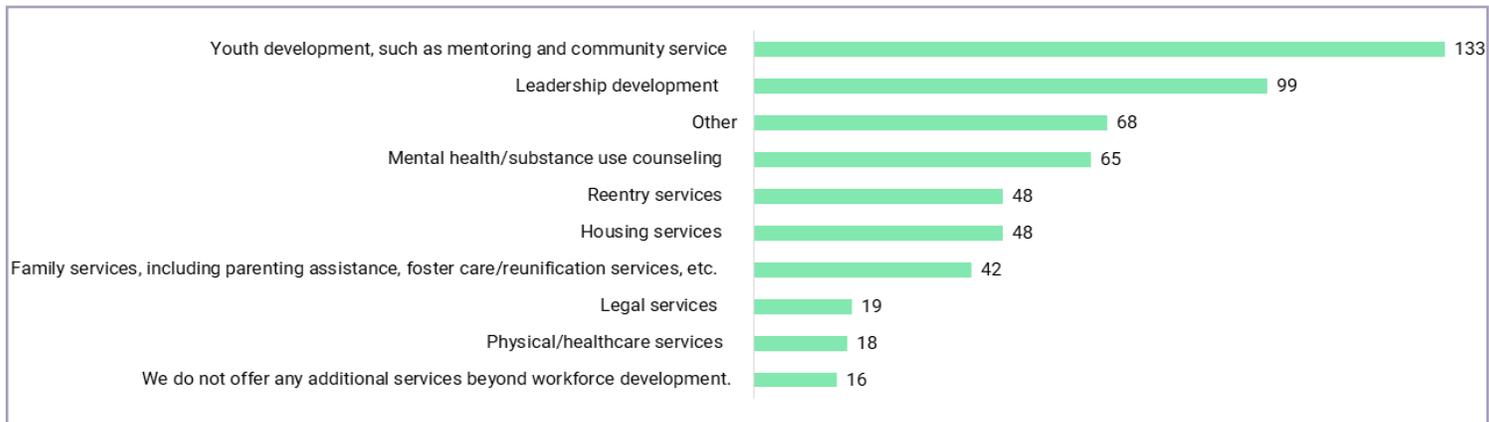
FIGURE 7: TOP SERVICE PROVIDED BEYOND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SERVICES (N=204)

Foundational Education and Skill Building

Foundational education and skill building remain a central and effective strategy in young adult workforce development. Seventy-seven percent of responding organizations (n=139) offer foundational skills training. The most often cited trainings (n=105) include GED or HSE preparation (68 mentions), adult basic education or literacy (57), and preparation for a high school diploma or equivalent credential (52), with more than half of respondents rated these services as mostly or extremely effective in preparing young adults for employment (see Figure 8).
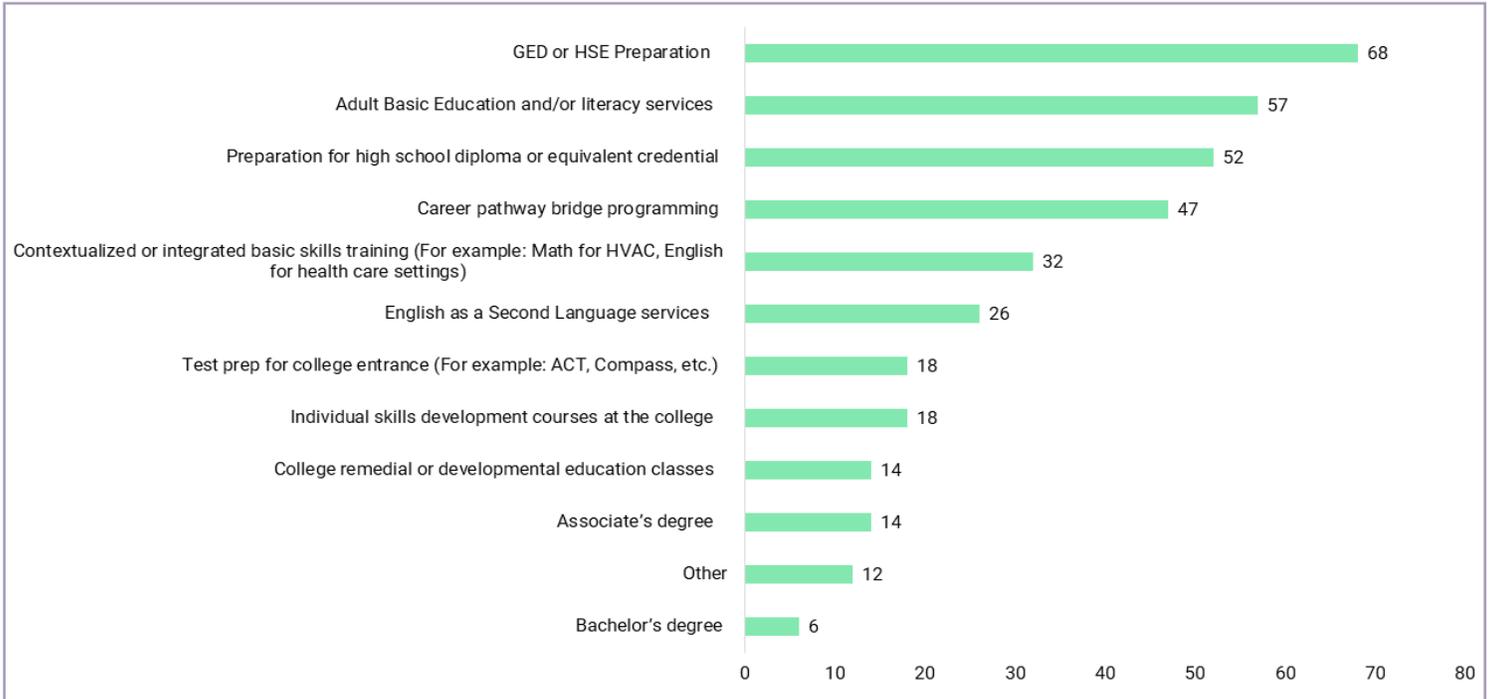
FIGURE 8: MOST FREQUENT EDUCATIONAL SERVICES PROVIDED (N=105)
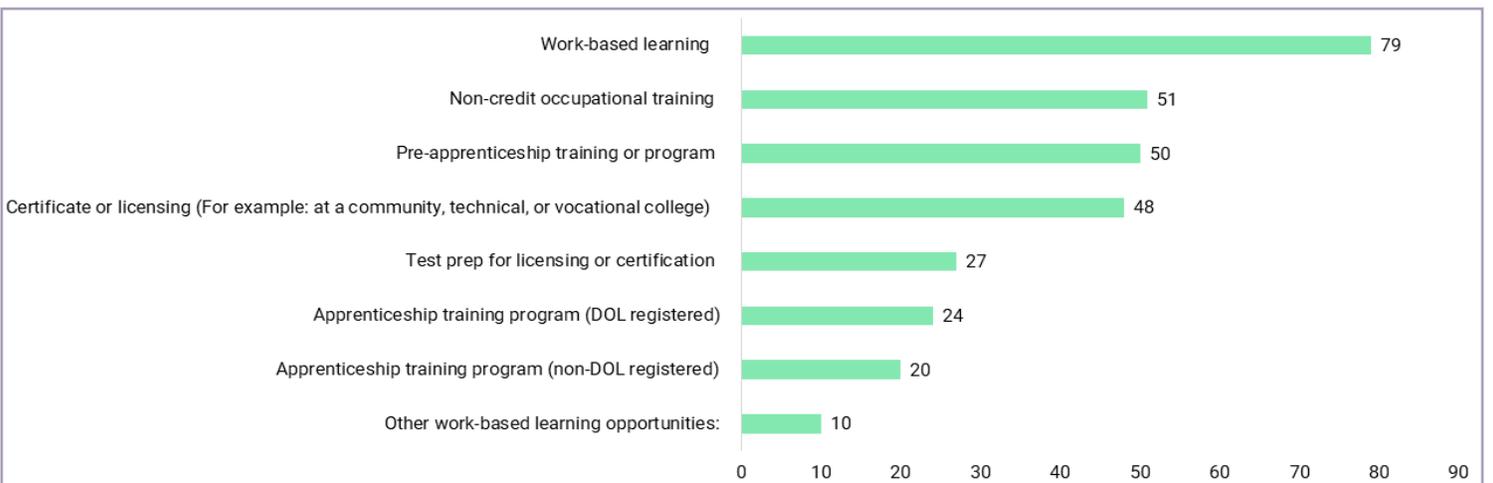
FIGURE 9: MOST FREQUENT JOB OR WORK READINESS SERVICES PROVIDED TO YOUNG ADULTS (N=113)

Job and Work Readiness Training

More than half (55%) of responding organizations (n=207) provide job and work readiness training. The most frequently cited services are (n=113):

- Work-based learning (79 mentions),
- Non-credit occupational training (51), and
- Pre-apprenticeship training or program (50) (see Figure 9).

Work-based learning, pre-apprenticeship training or programs, and certificate or licensing programs were most frequently rated as mostly or extremely effective (see Figure 10).
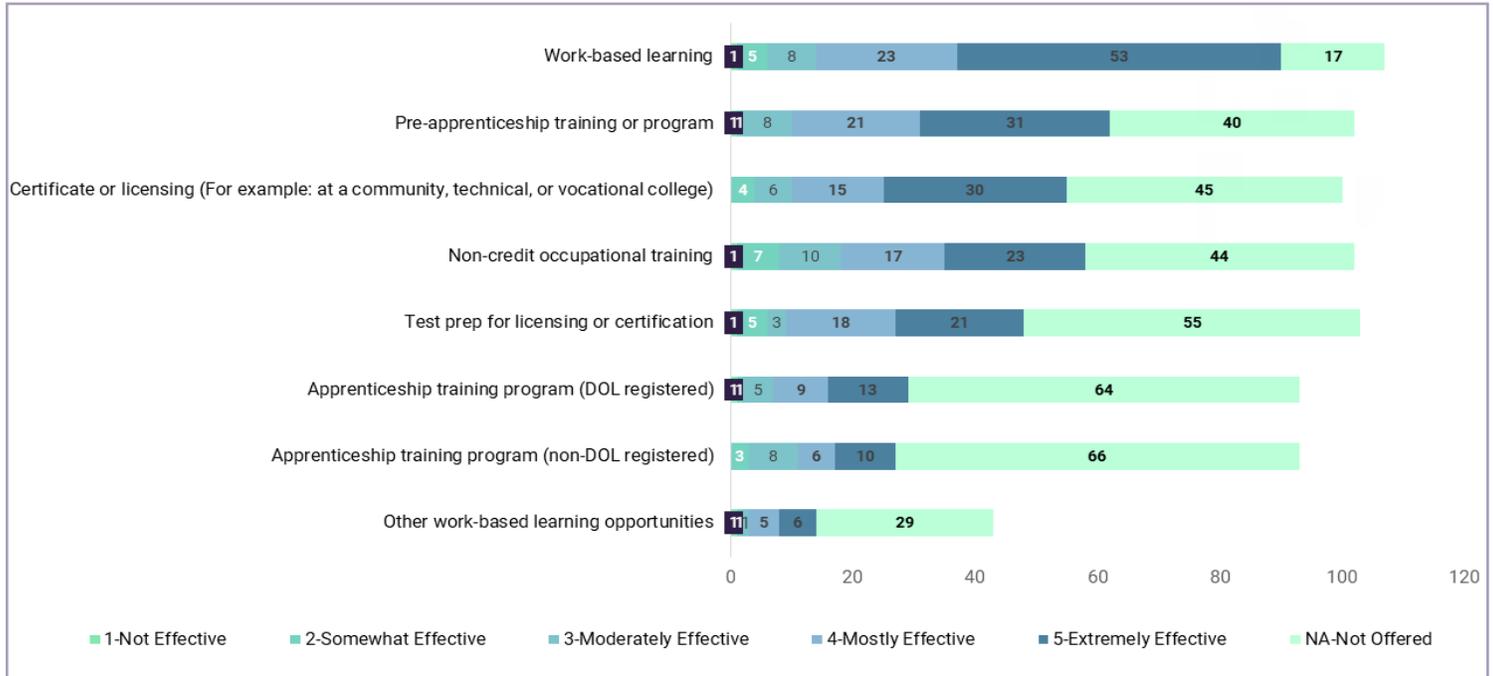
FIGURE 10: EFFECTIVENESS OF JOB OR WORK READINESS SERVICES TO YOUNG ADULTS

Occupational Skills Training

Seventy-three percent (73%, n=102) of survey respondents offer occupational skills training (see Figure 10). As shown in Figure 11 (n=101), the sectors most represented in occupational skills training programs include:

- Construction and extraction (38 mentions),
- Building, Grounds Cleaning, & Maintenance (28), and
- Healthcare Support Occupations (20) (see Figure 12).

Job Placement Services

The most common job placement services for responding organizations (n=125) are:

- On-the-job training (74 mentions),
- Mentorship support (71), and
- Post-placement and retention services (70) (Figure 13).
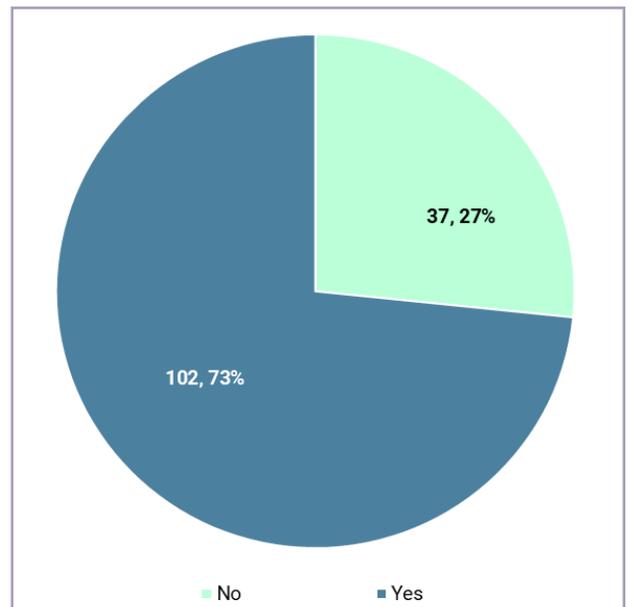
FIGURE 11: ORGANIZATION OFFERS OCCUPATIONAL SKILLS TRAINING TO YOUNG ADULTS (N=102)
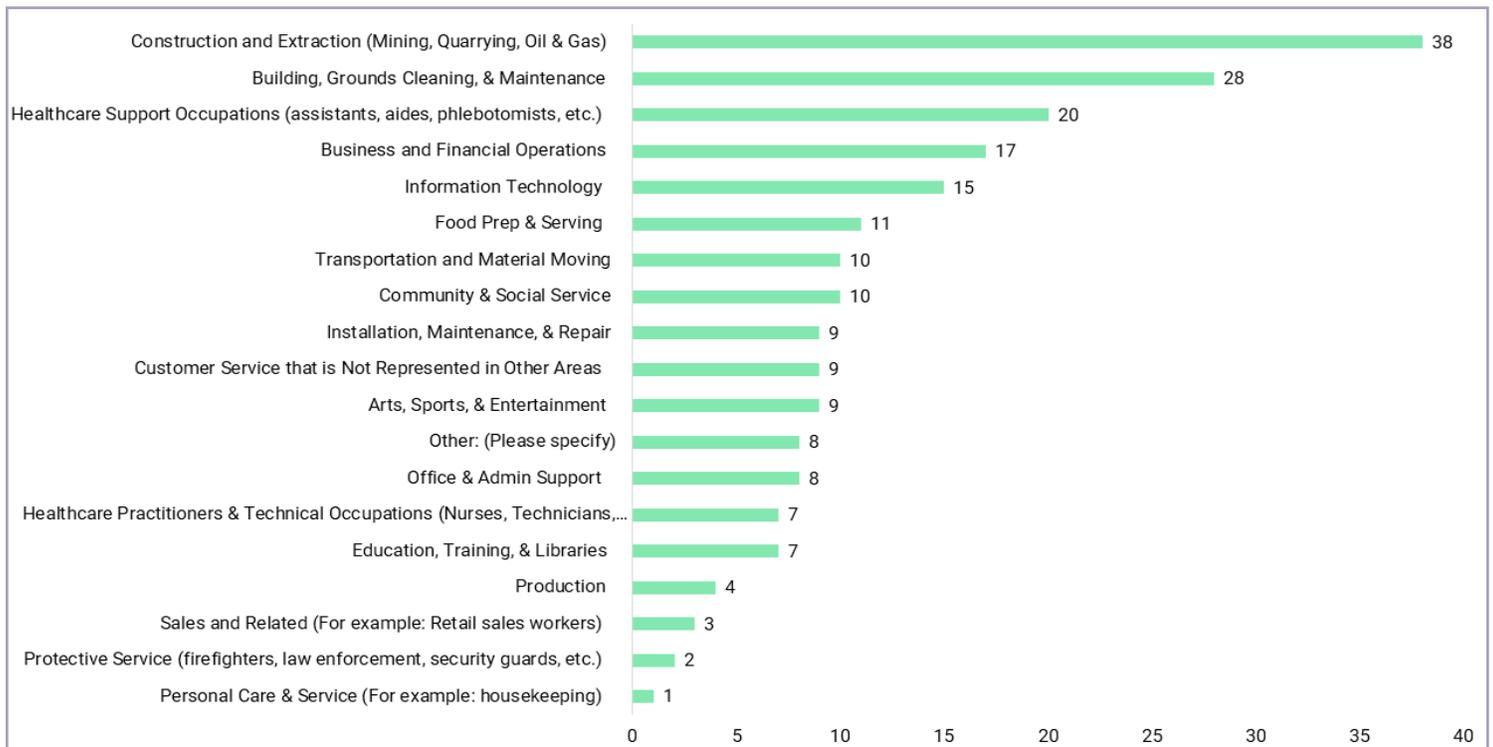
FIGURE 12: OCCUPATIONAL SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMS OFFERED TO YOUNG ADULTS (N=101)
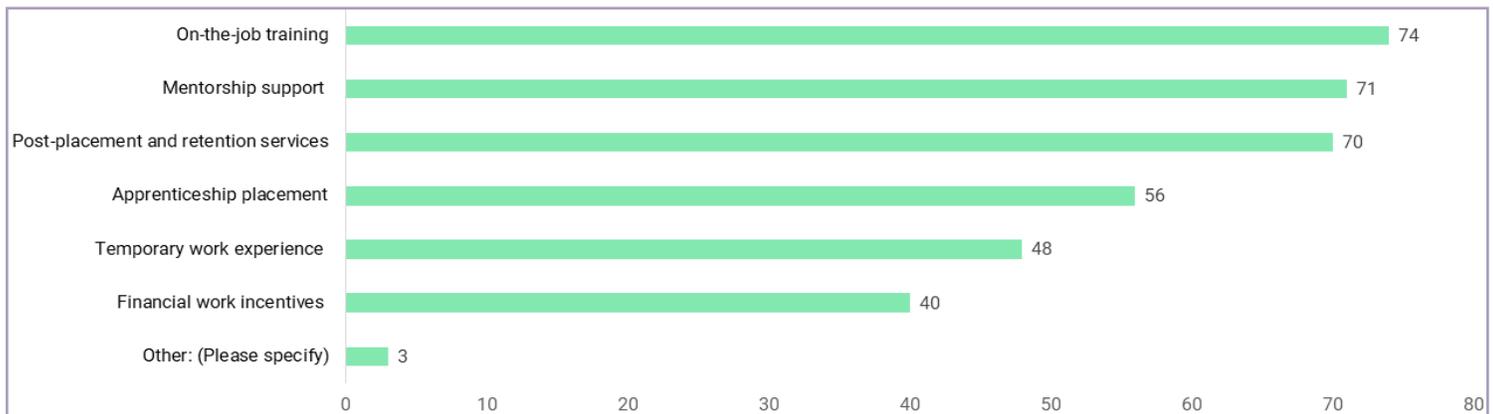
FIGURE 13: TYPES OF JOB PLACEMENT SERVICES PROVIDED TO YOUNG ADULTS (N=125)

Post-Placement Coaching and Retention Services

The top post-placement coaching and retention services provided by responding organizations (n=129) are:

- Continued access to supportive services (93 mentions),
- Continued access to career coaching (93), and
- Individual participant check-in meetings (90) (see Figure 14).

The range of services provided demonstrates the depth of support workforce organizations provide to help young adults prepare for, enter, and succeed in the labor market. These services reflect a comprehensive approach that focuses on skill building, career development, and individualized support.
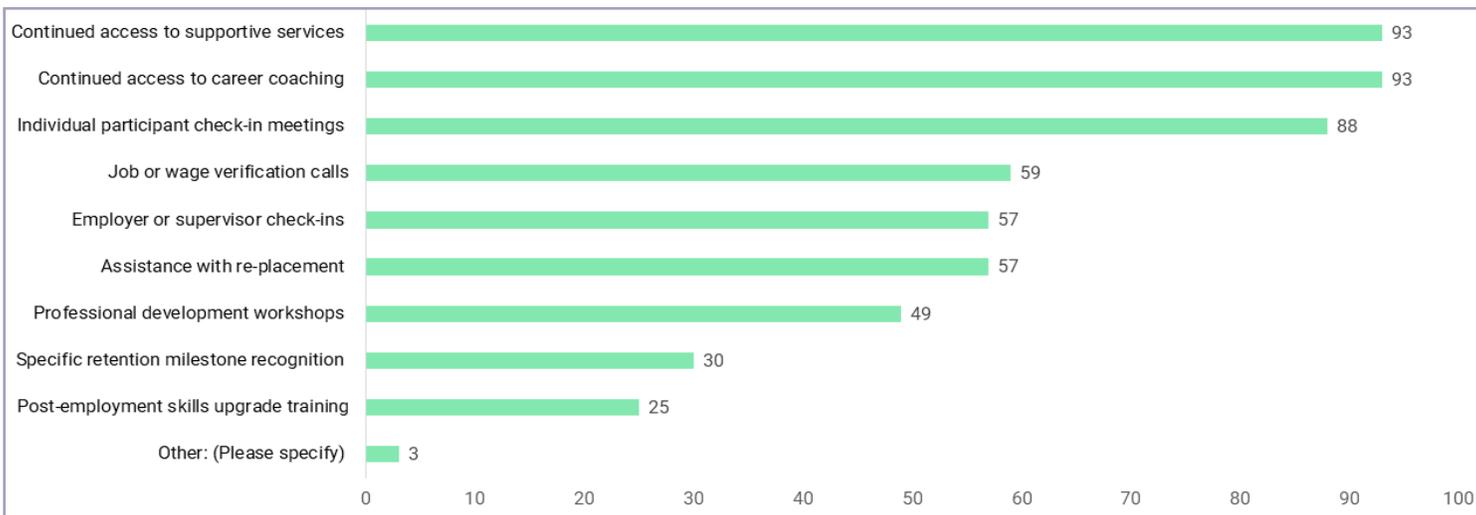
FIGURE 14: POST-PLACEMENT COACHING AND RETENTION SERVICES PROVIDED TO YOUNG ADULTS (N=129)

How Organizations Are Driving Success

Workforce organizations use a wide range of strategies to help young adults access meaningful employment. Yet, across YAWLA survey responses and focus group conversations, several practices stand out as those practitioners view as most effective for supporting young adults. As noted above in Figure 6 and reinforced across focus groups, participating organizations indicated that their most effective services include career coaching and case management, which enable access to critical wraparound supports, and the development of soft skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, and communication. Survey and focus group findings also highlight that engaging employers at the right level is essential for supporting young adults, and many practitioners noted the importance of having dedicated staff to manage and deepen employer relationships (see Figure 15).

Providing career coaching and case management; ensuring access to wraparound supports, developing "soft" or essential skills, and engaging employers are central to how workforce organizations drive young adult success. Together, these approaches illustrate how effective programs integrate personal connection, individualized support, and real-world learning to help young adults persist, grow, and secure stable employment.
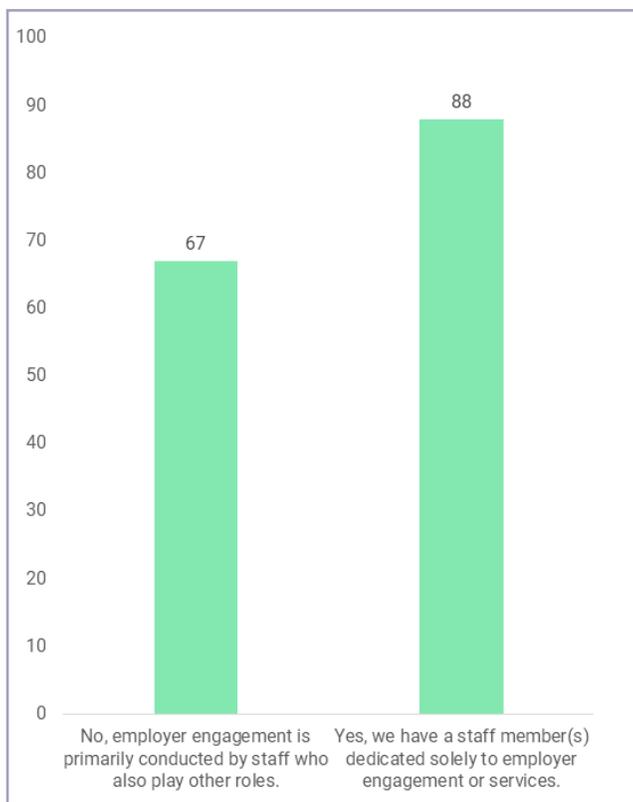
FIGURE 15: ORGANIZATIONS WITH DEDICATED STAFF FOR EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT (N=155)

Relationship-Centered Coaching & Case Management

Relationship-centered supports play a central role in helping young adults navigate challenges, build confidence, and remain engaged in workforce programs. For example, 91 respondents and many focus group participants named career coaching and case management as the most effective program element leading to secure employment for young adults, with many citing it as the most important factor to build the trust needed to retain program participants (see Figure 6). According to one focus group participant, "We build trust and create a

family environment where young people feel safe and heard." Another agreed: "Cohort models create a sense of belonging and lead to higher overall success rates."

Prior research underscores this as well. Berro et al. (2024) note that many young adults do not experience a sense of safety and belonging in workforce programs. Their findings show that when participants feel supported and connected, they are more likely to learn, make informed decisions, stay employed, and persist through challenges.

Across focus groups, practitioners consistently emphasized that the relationships young adults form with career coaches, case managers, and navigators are what ultimately drive successful workforce outcomes. These trusted relationships help identify challenges early, provide personalized support, and prevent disengagement: Practitioners also underscored that content alone cannot transform outcomes. Curriculum, videos, and standardized program activities are helpful, but insufficient without human connection:

> It's the relationship our students have with their career navigator, that trusted mentor is really important in helping to identify and troubleshoot early on. If a student is struggling with coursework or barriers, like falling behind on utilities, the navigator can step in. One student, just 30 days from graduation, was about to be withdrawn because her car broke down and she missed two clinicals. The navigator intervened, and she graduated.
>
> The only thing that's really moved the needle for us – I keep mentioning it, but it's the most important thing – is having the case management support. Having the case manager, like, the steady face, this is the same person that's been with them since they first signed up... If you were to just point out any young adult that gets a job (via our program) and ask me, 'Is this gonna work out for them or not?' You know, I would be able to tell you...just based on how engaged they are with our staff, with the case manage.
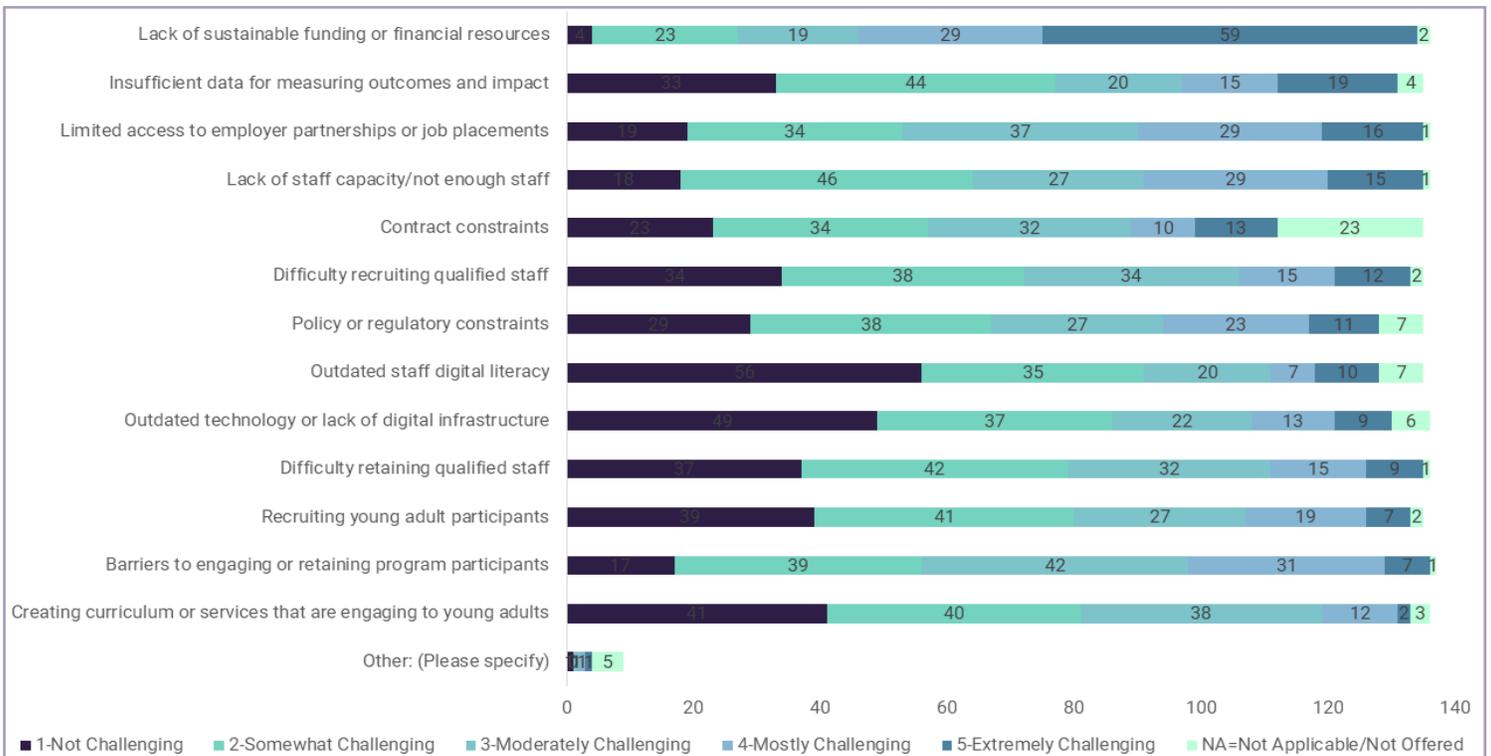
FIGURE 16: CHALLENGES ORGANIZATIONS FACE DELIVERING SERVICES TO YOUNG ADULTS (N=AT LEAST 135)

Practitioners also underscored that content alone cannot transform outcomes. Curriculum, videos, and standardized program activities are helpful, but insufficient without human connection:

> *You can't create a curriculum. You can't give a book. You can't give them a video. You can't put them through some program and have them be fixed on the other side. They need a connection. They need a mentor. They need somebody physically helping them, because it's not about a URL.*

These insights are strongly aligned with existing research. Developmental relationships that are authentic, consistent, and anchored in trust are foundational to agency and self-efficacy among young adults (Krauss, Pittman, & Johnson, 2016). Meanwhile, many students experience a decline in emotional support for learning during high school, often leading to intellectual or psychological withdrawal (Nagaoka et al., 2015). Workforce practitioners intentionally address this void, contributing to opportunities for young adults to experience a sense of ownership or deepening participation in a goal-oriented community.

Not surprisingly, many survey respondents indicated the need for more case managers or counselors to address service gaps and maximize program impact (see Figure 16). Additionally, many focus group participants cited that multi-year funding is needed to foster the relationships and trust needed for program success, especially for young adults left behind in more traditional institutions. As one practitioner noted:

> *It's 4 and 5 years' worth of work to be able to get them to the place where they're self-sustaining and doing what they need to do. It's not a 12-month project. Not only do we need the funding to be for multi years, but we need the reporting to be able to be understood. That is a multi-year reporting process as well, and that we're reporting over milestones…every one of those milestones that any youth and young adult meet within a program is a successful step forward.*

Building Young Adults' Soft Skills

When describing the skills most important for young adults to develop, survey and focus group responses regularly focused on "soft skills" or durable skills: the everyday behaviors and mindsets young adults need to get hired and retain a job. These skills include showing up on time, managing schedules and transportation, communicating clearly, following through on commitments, working on a team, navigating conflict, and advocating for themselves in new environments. In focus groups, participants consistently emphasized foundational soft skills as central to young adults' early employment success.

Employers tell programs that these soft or durable skills are often more critical than specific technical abilities for entry-level roles. While employers can teach job-specific tasks, they struggle when young adults lack reliability, professionalism, or basic workplace communication. As one participant noted, "[Employers] don't necessarily care what skills young adults have as long as they have the soft skills: if they can show up to work, not offend the people that they work with, that kind of thing. They say that everything else they will teach them on the job site."

In response, programs are treating soft skills as a core learning outcome through goal-centered coaching, executive functioning seminars and sessions, and structured opportunities to practice communication at work.

> *The other key thing that I think is really important for our participants is…our coaching model [which is], of course, family centered, but also an executive functioning skills model. And so, we really talk explicitly a lot about the twelve executive functioning skills and how we use them, what our strengths are, and how to mitigate for your struggles.*

The emphasis practitioners place on communication, reliability, and executive functioning echoes broader research (e.g. Lippman et al., 2015), which identifies foundational soft skills as key drivers of young adults' employment, wage growth, and career advancement.

Tied to young adults' development of soft skills, participants reiterated the importance of developing occupational skills via work-based learning (WBL), including internships, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeships. Participants characterized work-based learning as essential for helping young adults build both technical and interpersonal skills. These hands-on opportunities accelerate skill development and strengthen job placement outcomes by allowing employers to observe young adults' readiness in real time. As one practitioner explained, "Those young adults, if they are successful, may be hired even before they finish their training… the employer gets to see: are they showing up on time? Are they doing those 'soft-skill things' needed to succeed?"

Ultimately, programs that blend soft-skill development, hands-on training, and industry-recognized credentials are best positioned to prepare young adults for roles that align with employer expectations and lead to stronger retention and advancement.

Holistic Supports Are Critical to Program Retention

Holistic, individualized supports play an important role in helping young adults stay engaged and persist through workforce programs. Forty (40) participating organizations identified individualized, wraparound supports, such as housing, food, transportation, childcare, and mental health services, as essential to participant success. Many focus group members also cited wraparound services that meet young adults where they are as being essential to program retention and outcomes. Said one participant, "Retention improves when young adults receive support beyond employment, such as housing stability, mental health counseling, and financial coaching."

A notable shift in the past five years has been the increased need for mental health support, in particular. This is a pattern reflected in both survey data and focus group discussions. One survey respondent described their new program as follows: "Through (our) Therapy Program, participants now receive counseling support that is directly linked to job readiness and workplace resilience." Another respondent added that they now add mental health supports for a full year after graduation. This aligns with what we heard frequently from focus group participants, who described rising mental health needs among young adults as perhaps the biggest shift facing organizations over the past five years. One participant shared:

> *Yeah, the biggest change is the mental health support. So we hired a full-time behavioral health specialist on our staff… We had to find a way to justify having her on the team, and we did it. But it has made a world of difference.*

As much as practitioners recognize the importance of wraparound services, including mental health supports, many are unable to fully address the need. The most cited service gaps from survey respondents include transportation assistance (61 mentions), childcare assistance (55), and access to mental health or supportive services (50) (see Figure 17). These are due, in some part, to funding constraints. As one focus group member explained, the challenge is not a lack of understanding, but a lack of resources.

> *[Funders need to] be willing to fund both operations and direct financial assistance…If you're only willing to give me operating dollars, well, how am I to go pull together funding somewhere else to be able to cover that transportation or childcare cost?*

Support that addresses the whole person plays a critical role in helping young adults stay committed to their goals. When basic needs are met and meaningful resources are available, participants are more likely to remain engaged and successfully transition into employment
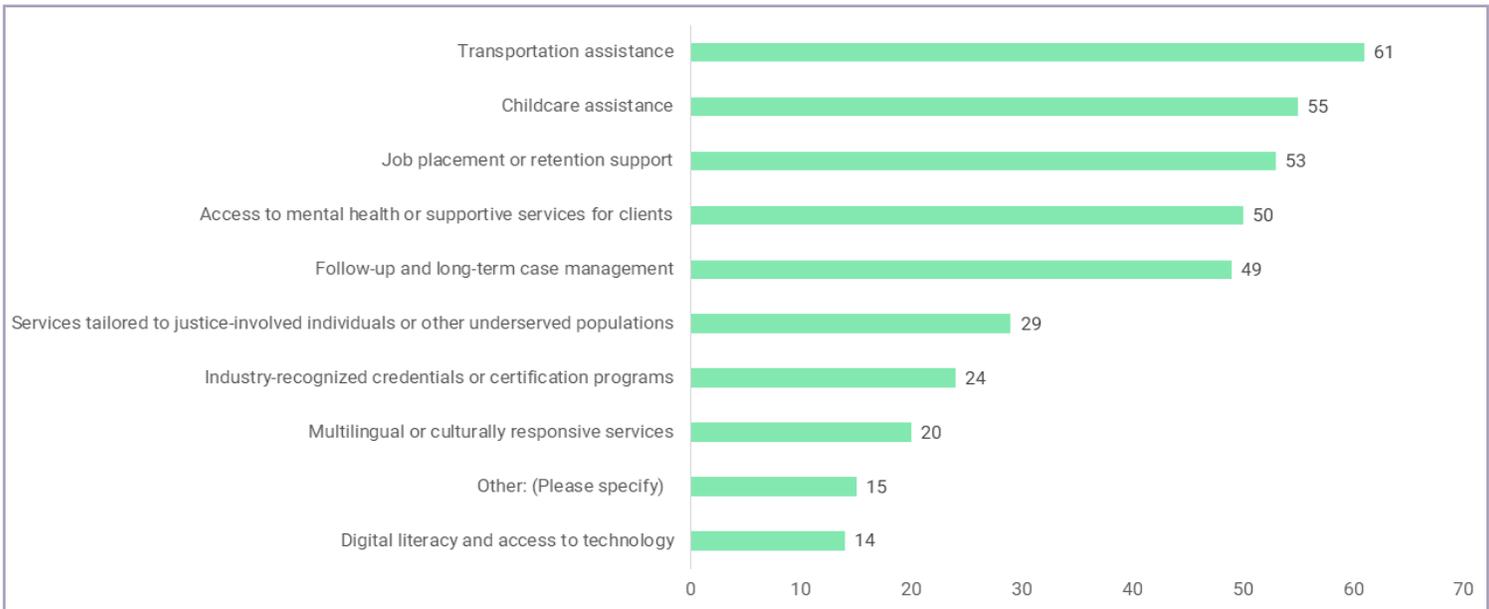
FIGURE 17: GREATEST SERVICE GAPS ORGANIZATIONS FACE MEETING NEEDS OF YOUNG ADULT JOB SEEKERS AND EMPLOYERS (N=138)

Organizations Are Prioritizing Employer Engagement

Out of 167 organizations surveyed, 157 reported active engagement with employers, signaling broad consensus that employer collaboration drives outcomes for young adults. The most common forms of engagement include employers interviewing or hiring participants (141 organizations), providing career exposure and readiness activities (137), and offering internships (117) (see Figure 18).

Eighty-four (84) organizations reported having at least one full-time staff member dedicated solely to employer engagement, an important signal that many providers are investing in the infrastructure required to sustain these relationships.

Employer participation often centers on short-term exposure, such as job fairs, mock interviews, or one-off internships, while far fewer organizations facilitate apprenticeships or structured career pipelines. This pattern may reflect limited capacity on both sides or a lack of shared understanding about sector needs and the value deeper collaboration can offer. As a result, many relationships remain at a basic level rather than maturing into strategic partnerships.
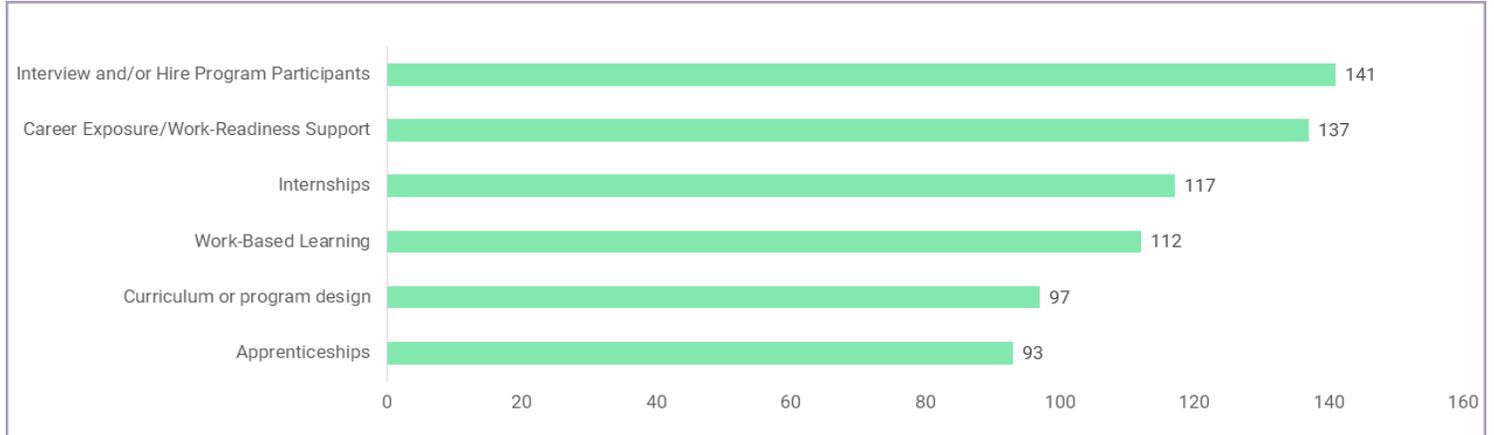
FIGURE 18: MOST FREQUENT WAYS EMPLOYERS ENGAGE WITH PROGRAMS (N=AT LEAST 141)

Although the sample size is small, several observations emerged about organizations reporting the highest job retention at 90, 180, and 365 days. These organizations tend to have dedicated employer-engagement staff and consistently provide career exposure or work-readiness opportunities. They also show higher rates of employer involvement in offering work-based learning opportunities and internships. More than half of responding organizations with the highest retention rates reported offering apprenticeship pathways. While these patterns should not be interpreted as definitive findings, they offer insight into potential practices associated with stronger retention outcomes among young adults (see Table 7).

TABLE 7: EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIZATIONS REPORTING 81%-100% JOB RETENTION RATES FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Measure	90 Days	180 Days	365 Days
Dedicated Employer Engagement Staff (n=19, n=12, n=8)	63% have dedicated staff	50% have dedicated staff	63% have dedicated staff
Career Exposure or Work Readiness Opportunities (n=19, n=12, n=8)	100% employers provide	100% employers provide	100% employers provide
Work-Based Learning Opportunities (n=19, n=12, n=8)	79% employers provide	75% employers provide	63% employers provide
Apprenticeship Opportunities (n=19, n=12, n=8)	68% provide apprenticeships	58% provide apprenticeships	50% provide apprenticeships
Internship Opportunities (n=19, n=12, n=9)	79% provide internships	83% provide internships	78% provide internships
Employers Interview or Hire Candidates (n=19, n=12, n=8)	89% interview or hire	83% interview or hire	75% interview or hire

3 SECTION THREE

What's Holding the Field Back

Findings from the survey and focus groups reveal that even as workforce organizations achieve meaningful results for young adults, several structural and operational challenges limit their ability to sustain or scale those outcomes. These challenges affect how organizations track progress, engage employers, support young adults facing complex barriers, and navigate funding environments that often do not align with the realities of workforce development.

This section highlights the most common barriers identified by practitioners, including difficulties tracking and communicating long-term outcomes; limits to employer involvement; persistent challenges facing young adults; and funding structures that constrain service delivery and long-term support. Together, these insights illustrate where system-level improvements are needed to strengthen impact across the field.

Section Three Key Takeaways

1   **Workforce organizations demonstrate deep commitment and adaptability, but persistent funding instability and rigid performance metrics present challenges**. Short-term funding cycles and narrow definitions of success undermine sustainability and innovation.

2   **Varied terminology for similar populations creates confusion and weakens collective measurement**. Inconsistent use of terms such as "opportunity youth," "disconnected," or "at-promise" makes collaboration and evaluation more difficult.

3   **Retention tracking decreases sharply at 90, 180, and 365 days, underscoring the need for long-term contact and support**. Few organizations have the staff capacity or systems to sustain post-placement engagement.

4   **Tracking systems for employment status, job quality, and progression remain uneven**. Without reliable data, it's difficult to identify participants in danger of losing employment or to demonstrate program impact to funders.

5   **Young adults face compounding structural barriers to employment, including unmet basic needs, limited access to mental health supports, and inconsistent or ad hoc job matching**. These challenges are intensified by a growing mismatch between young adults' preferences for flexibility and purpose and the realities of available entry-level work, undermining retention and long-term mobility across programs.

6   **Short-term, outcome-driven, and otherwise inflexible funding models are misaligned with the multi-year, holistic nature of young adult workforce development**. Funding realities constrain organizations' capacity to sustain staff, provide essential wraparound supports, and recognize meaningful progress beyond narrow placement metrics.

Barriers to Tracking, Measuring, and Communicating Program Impact

Workforce organizations serving young adults are increasingly asked to demonstrate not just job placement, but long-term retention, advancement, and job quality elements, such as access to health care benefits or wage increases. . Yet the findings from this research indicate that organizations are being asked to document multi-year impact without the systems, staffing, flexibility, or shared frameworks required to do so. Two interconnected categories of barriers emerged clearly across both survey data and focus groups: structural barriers, including inconsistent systems, siloed definitions, and difficulty maintaining contact with young adults, and organizational barriers, including staff shortages, funding instability, and metric-driven expectations that do not reflect the real trajectory of young adult progress.

Structural Barriers

Understanding long-term outcomes is essential to assessing economic mobility, yet many providers lack the infrastructure needed to track participants beyond the point of placement. Nearly half of organizations that responded to the survey (96 of n=172) do not track job retention at all. Survey responses also reveal broader gaps in data collection. Roughly 23% of respondents reported, "I do not know/We don't collect this," for at least one program outcome, and 28% said the same about tracking participant barriers to employment. Multiple explanations may exist for these data gaps, including differences in program outcomes data, limited access to outcome data, and program inability to collect this data. Even if these measures are not integral to program design, organizations should remain aware of the valuable insights that tracking these outcomes can provide (see Table 8).

TABLE 8: BENEFITS TO TRACKING EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AND BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT	
Benefits to Tracking Employment Outcomes	Benefits to Tracking Barriers to Employment
Demonstrates the indirect impacts programs can have on job attainment and retention, even if not a program outcome.	When organizations know the specific barriers young adults face to employment, they can design supports and program elements that directly address those challenges.
Program staff can leverage employment information to identify transferable skill alignment between transitional work and a desired career.	Understanding these barriers helps organizations identify mismatches between job readiness and job requirements.
Tracking employment data builds credibility with funders and policymakers.	Demonstrates that performance outcomes (like placement or retention rates) are often influenced by structural barriers, not simply program effectiveness.
Aggregating employment data can reveal trends in access, equity, and job quality.	When programs acknowledge and respond to participants' lived challenges, they foster trust and psychological safety, especially among young adults who have experienced systemic inequities.
	Tracking barriers allows organizations to contextualize, transforming data from a compliance measure to a tool for learning and continuous improvement.

Tracking job quality raises additional challenges. Eight in ten organizations tracking job quality measures reported that fewer than 40% of young adults receive a pay increase in their first year after placement, and roughly half reported that only 1–20% are promoted in that timeframe. Healthcare access tells a similar story: nearly half of organizations indicated that only 1–40% of participants gain employer-sponsored insurance within a year (see Table 9). These important indicators of economic mobility often remain invisible in formal reporting systems, not because they are insignificant, but because organizations lack consistent ways to collect or communicate them.

TABLE 9: PERCENTAGE OF PLACED PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS WITH INCREASED JOB QUALITY WITHIN FIRST YEAR (N=45)

Percentage of young adults who are promoted in the first year after program completion (n=45)		Percentage of young adults who receive pay increase in the first year after program completion (n=45)		Percentage of young adults who can access health care through work in the first year after program completion (n=45)	
Average Percentage Rate	Percentage of Organization Responses	Average Percentage Rate	Percentage of Organization Responses	Average Percentage Rate	Percentage of Organization Responses
1-20%	51%	1-20%	31%	1-20%	27%
21-40%	36%	21-40%	31%	21-40%	29%
41-60%	7%	41-60%	18%	41-60%	20%
61-80%	4%	61-80%	13%	61-80%	13%
81-100%	2%	81-100%	7%	81-100%	11%

One major challenge in tracking barriers is programs' difficulty staying connected to young adults after exit. Frequent changes in contact information, such as phone numbers, email, or physical address, make follow-up challenging. Many rely on informal communication (e.g., text messages or social media), personal connections, or social media to gather retention information. Even when they are successful in contacting program alumni, those young adults may be reluctant to re-engage after leaving the program. As practitioners explained:

> *We're emailing and texting…using LinkedIn to spy on them.*
>
> *One of the things I've noticed is when someone moves closer to being job ready, their services dip down… Often there's a main theme that they don't want help. They don't. They believe that help is a weakness. So, if someone is helping me, then I am not good enough.*
>
> *Young people think to themselves, "I'm not responding them because they were still serving me when I was making the worst decisions." So, to me, that's the ultimate intangible result is you won't get the feedback. It's very rare that someone's like, 'I'm doing so well right now. Thank you so much.'…You don't get that. You actually just get silence."*

Among those that do track job retention, retention falls sharply over time—approximately 50% of young adults remain employed after 180 days (n=87), and only about one-third after 365 days (n=82) (see Table 9). These patterns may speak as much to inconsistent or informal data collection practices as it could to actual job retention. For example, a total of 104 organizations rely primarily on self-reported employment data, and 72 depend on informal staff interactions for verification (see Figure 19). These methods provide valuable touchpoints, but they produce fragmented data that is difficult to analyze across time or programs.

Compounding these barriers is the lack of shared definitions for the populations served. Terms such as "opportunity youth," "disconnected," "underemployed," "WIOA-eligible," "high school stop-outs," or "at-promise"

reflect varying philosophies, funding requirements, or local contexts. However, this lack of shared language makes it harder to align across agencies or communicate collective impact. As one focus group member framed it:

> *We're all serving the same young people but using different words to describe them—and that makes it harder to tell a unified story.*

Working at the national level to identify one term to define this population could make it easier to coalesce partners and businesses around a common goal. Alternatively, moving away from labels to reframing youth-focused narratives around system conditions, community supports, and shared responsibility—an approach recommended by The Frameworks Institute (2024)—may help the field communicate impact more effectively and reduce the stigma that may impede employment outcomes.
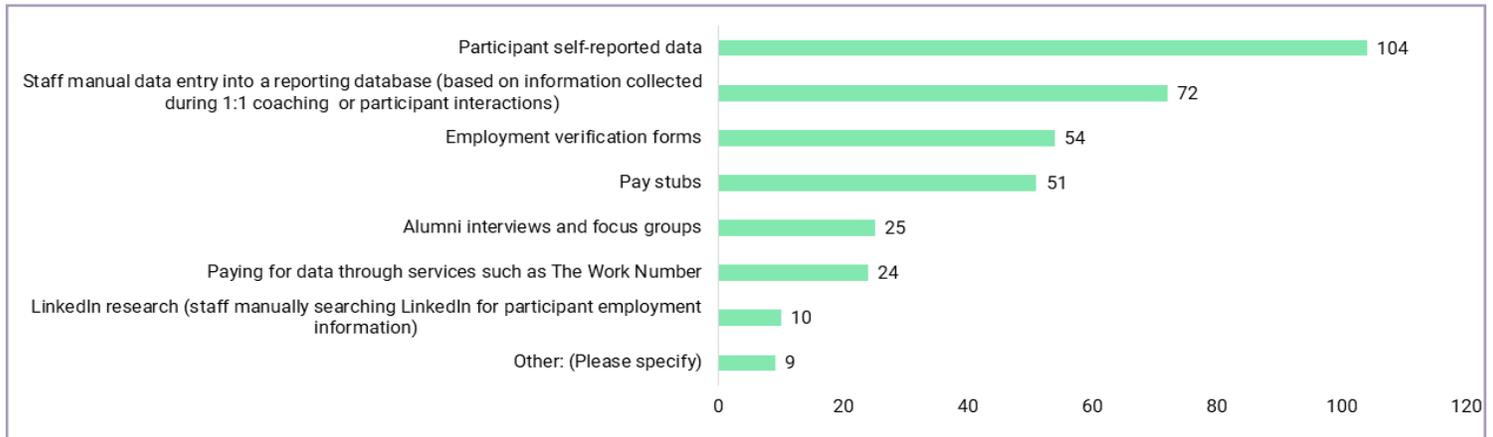
FIGURE 19: EMPLOYMENT VERIFICATION METHODS (N=120)

Organizational Barriers

Even when organizations have systems in place, many lack the staffing capacity and stable funding required to collect, analyze, and communicate outcome data. Respondents reported moderate to extreme challenges related to staff capacity (71 mentions), recruiting qualified staff (61), and retaining staff (56) (see Figure 16). These trends mirror findings in the Power of Us Workforce Survey (AIR, 2025), which confirmed that workforce practitioners face low compensation, high workloads, emotional stress, and limited access to professional development.

As practitioners described:

> *I can't have too many caseworker-type people—they're hard to find right now and hard to keep.*
>
> *For our single parents to meet the MIT Living Wage calculator it would take $70,000 to $75,000 for our region—there are folks on my staff who don't make that.*

These staffing constraints reduce capacity for outcome tracking, relational support, and long-term follow-up, the very elements most critical to job retention.

Funding structures amplify the challenge. Workforce development is a 2- to 4-year process for many young adults, yet the vast majority of organizations operate under one-year, restricted funding cycles that prioritize compliance-oriented reporting and short-term metrics. Practitioners repeatedly noted that narrowly defined performance expectations often fail to account for stabilization, barrier removal, or incremental progress. As one participant put it, "People just want the pure outcomes…as if it all happens in a straight line."

Another noted the disconnect between the realities of entry-level labor markets and the wage benchmarks now used in performance frameworks, "If 80% of your jobs don't meet the MIT living wage calculator, then the program's not a success…but those jobs just don't exist in our region."

Short-term funding also limits experimentation, youth-centered approaches, and employer engagement, each of which require time and relationship-building. Taken together, structural and organizational barriers constrain the field's ability to track, understand, and communicate outcomes in ways that reflect young adults' lived experiences and real labor-market conditions.

Limits to Employer Involvement

Findings from the focus groups provide more insight into limits to employer involvement in young adult workforce development. While employer engagement is widespread, several persistent barriers prevent these relationships from developing into deeper, mutually accountable partnerships.

Many organizations lack the mechanisms needed for employers to help shape curriculum, define competencies, or share accountability for outcomes. For example, programs do not necessarily have structured systems for employers to offer ongoing feedback on participant preparedness, skill gaps, or workplace performance.

Participants also explained that employers, especially small and mid-sized firms, often have limited time, awareness, or internal capacity to engage beyond occasional events or hiring fairs. One focus group participant described employers' limited familiarity with available resources and supports:

> *We've seen a lot of employers struggling with capacity and with resources…So we launched a conference last year that brought together industry partners as well as legislators and state leaders and people in the workforce system to highlight some things that are working really well and ways that employers are using resources so they can then ultimately benefit their employees. Because we know that oftentimes employers do want to pay better but they don't have the ability to do so, or they just have no idea about, you know, like a registered apprenticeship program, or something called "Learn and Earn" in West Virginia that pays for someone's salary for up to 6 months…Employers were blown away…*

Others emphasized the administrative burden that employers face when participating in subsidized employment, mentoring young adults new to the workplace, or navigating apprenticeship processes. As one participant shared: Focus group participants also described challenges related to the lack of clarity around "job readiness." Employers frequently express a desire for job-ready candidates, but they rarely define what that readiness entails in clear or measurable terms. Without shared expectations about required skills, behaviors, or credentials, workforce programs struggle to identify which participants meet employer needs, or to design training that builds the competencies employers value.

> *There are some supportive employment programs out there, they tend to have a lot of bureaucratic barriers to employers participating in them. But if there was some financial incentive for putting in the extra time that it takes to bring along a young worker...I think programs like that have the best chances to be successful.*

The research literature reinforces these concerns. Weak alignment between employer expectations and training content continues to create mismatches between the skills young adults gain and the jobs available to them (Patterson, 2021). Without consistent employer input and feedback, practitioners warned, workforce programs risk preparing young adults for yesterday's jobs rather than those emerging in a changing economy.

Finally, we heard frequently across focus groups that employers are becoming more reluctant to hire young adults, or hire at all:

> *"But we'll still have a hard time trying to change requirements for jobs to not just require a college degree but focus more on, like, skills"*
>
> *"I think employers have progressively become more hesitant to hire. Employers are operating while understaffed. And they will list, you know, we're interested, and we need help, but when it comes to hiring, they are very hesitant."*
>
> *"You know, they sound like they're interested in hiring the person, but sometimes they don't pull the trigger."*
>
> *"We have employment challenges building students resumes for those in non-healthcare careers like IT. Employers expect two years' experience and not a lot of those employers are open to providing internship opportunities for two-year degree students."*
>
> *"Our communities say we don't have young people who will work, but we're advocating for our community to invest in this special population to give them an opportunity. So it's been difficult in some areas for internships."*

This reluctance may reflect more than individual employer preferences. Prior research points to broader economic conditions shaping employer behavior. In No Country for Young Grads, Burning Glass (2025) argues that structural shifts over the past five years, including employers operating with leaner workforces during the pandemic and increasing reliance on AI for routine and entry-level tasks, have made it more difficult for college graduates to access entry-level employment. These factors could create greater competition for entry-level employment for non-credentialed young adults.

Persistent Barriers Facing Young Adults

Responses to the survey and focus groups point to a recurring theme: despite ongoing efforts to connect young adults with employment, persistent structural and alignment challenges continue to hinder retention and long-term outcomes. Survey findings reveal the depth of these challenges. Twenty-six percent (26%) of respondents reported that 81-100% of their young adult participants face structural barriers to employment (see Figure 20). Among identified service gaps (n=108), transportation (51 organizations), childcare (49), mental health and supportive

services (43), and job placement or retention support (40) were cited most frequently (see Figure 20). Notably, only four of 126 respondents reported offering in-house childcare, underscoring a major service gap in meeting the holistic needs of young adult participants (see Figure 17 and Table 10).

Several other themes emerged that may influence job retention and long-term outcomes for young adults:

Ad Hoc Job Matching

Qualitative data reinforces that many organizations lack a systemic means of matching young adults to employment opportunities. Despite ongoing efforts to connect young adults with employment, many job placements still fail to align with their long-term goals, values, or workplace preferences. In focus groups, participants discussed matching youth to jobs in an ad hoc manner, lacking structured processes to assess interests, values, or workplace fit.

Evolving Youth Priorities and Work Preferences

Focus group participants consistently reported that young adults increasingly express a desire for meaningful, flexible work that prioritizes wellbeing and autonomy. At the same time, many of the entry-level positions available, particularly in retail and hospitality, do not offer what young adults need when it comes to flexibility, advancement opportunities, and scheduling that aligns with personal and family needs.

Service Gap	Count
Transportation assistance	51
Childcare assistance	49
Access to mental health or supportive services for clients	43
Job placement or retention support	40
Follow-up and long-term case management	36
Services tailored to justice-involved individuals or other underserved populations	25
Industry-recognized credentials or certification programs	19
Other: (Please specify)	15
Multilingual or culturally responsive services	15
Digital literacy and access to technology	13

FIGURE 21: SERVICE GAPS ORGANIZATIONS FACE IN MEETING YOUNG ADULTS' NEEDS (N=108)

TABLE 10: SERVICES PROVIDED BEYOND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: "OTHER" OPEN RESPONSES (N=68)

Service Provided	Mentions	Service Provided	Mentions
Access to education (K-8, high school, beyond high school, adult education)	29	Healthcare access (glasses, gym access)	3
Food access (vouchers, SNAP, farm/market/pantry access)	9	Legal services	3
Mental health supports (therapy, mental/behavioral health counseling, therapy animals)	9	Camp	2
Other training (digital literacy, first aid, English as a Second Language)	6	Financial literacy	2
Supportive services/navigator for supportive services	6	Leadership development	2
Benefits counseling/navigation	5	Work attire	2
Professional services to other organizations (PD, business/economic development, curriculum development, etc.)	5	Citizenship	1
Work-based learning opportunities	5	Energy assistance	1
Career navigation	4	Entrepreneurship/business formation support	1
Case management	4	License reinstatement	1
Childcare	4	Policy advocacy	1
Housing	4	Resume assistance	1
Transportation assistance	4	Substance dependency treatment services	1
Vocational training/credentials	4	Tax preparation	1
Financial assistance	3	Vocational rehabilitation	1

Growing Demand for Mental Health Support

Organizations report growing demand for mental health supports, which can exceed program capacity, particularly in rural areas where professional resources are scarce. This mismatch, compounded by persistent structural barriers such as lack of transportation or childcare, contributes to low retention rates and constrained upward mobility for young adult workers.

These patterns align with recent research showing how mental health, purpose, and work preferences are shaping young adults' career decisions. A 2022 Harvard Graduate School of Education report found that 36% of young adults experience anxiety and 29% experience depression, highlighting the growing need for accessible mental health supports. Likewise, a 2023 Morning Consult survey for Samsung's Solve for Tomorrow initiative found that 50% of youth ages 16–25 aspire to become entrepreneurs, driven by a desire for autonomy, balance, and purpose.

Consistent with these trends, Deloitte's Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey (2025) found that young workers increasingly prioritize flexibility, work-life balance, mental health, and meaningful work when deciding whether to stay with an employer. Nearly one-third (31%) of Gen Z respondents said they would leave a job within two years if they did not see clear opportunities for growth. Focus group participants echoed these findings, noting that the young adults they serve often prefer gig work over committing to employers or roles that do not align with their interests and needs.

Funding Structures and Expectations

Findings from both the survey and focus groups point to a consistent challenge across the field: funding structures challenge organizations' ability to deliver the full range of services young adults need. More than 100 organizations participating in the survey identified lack of sustainable funding or financial resources as a major challenge to providing services to young adults (see Figure 29). While many workforce organizations have diversified their funding streams, the system remains heavily dependent on federal and state funding. As one survey respondent noted, "Our funding is diversified, but our federal, state, and private grants will potentially be impacted by events and decisions at the federal level" (see Table 3: funding).

Organizations face vulnerabilities related to funding dependencies. For example, 25% of respondents foresee laying off staff in the next six months (n=130), 37% anticipate capping or decreasing program enrollment (n=131), and 41% expect to reduce services to young adults (n=130) due to recent funding and policy shifts (see Figure 22).

FIGURE 22: IMPACTS OF RECENT FUNDING AND POLICY SHIFTS

Practitioners have a strong understanding of what works in young adult workforce development. However, they reported feeling hamstrung by rigid funding structures and short-term contracts that prioritize compliance over learning and improvement.

> *Federal, state, and city funding all come with red tape and outcome-driven regulations. We may help a young person stabilize and get a bridge job, but if they don't meet a defined outcome within the reporting window, it doesn't count—even when we know that change takes time.*

Practitioners described how funding cycles and outcome expectations often fail to account for the time commitment required to get young adults placed in a quality job or the incremental progress that defines most young adults' journeys.

Several participants emphasized that current reporting expectations overlook qualitative progress and create incentives that elevate numbers over impact and actual progress.

Funding limitations are especially acute for wraparound supports that are vital for participation and retention. Practitioners repeatedly described wraparound supports, including transportation, childcare, and housing, as essential supports. Without funding for these supports, even strong program models struggle to keep young adults engaged. One focus group participant noted the paradox that private donors are pulling back on what they see as 'extras,' but that those supports are what keeps young adults in program. Several noted that the opportunity cost of program participation with no income is too much for many participants to bear.

> *Let's say, RN—that's probably your best bang for your buck—in 2 years you can be a fully registered and credentialed RN making $85,000 to $90,000 starting. So that's a 3-year commitment that we're making from enrollment to graduation and then getting into them into workforce. In the nonprofit world, you're working with year-to-year funding, so it's 1-year funding that has to be managed for a 3-year investment in a student. Our biggest challenges is that year-to-year funding does not line up really well with our multi-year commitment to students.*
>
> *Funders and policymakers need to understand that success isn't just getting someone into a job. If a young person comes in off the street with nothing and now has stable housing, a bridge job, and is enrolled in trade school—that's success. We need multi-year funding and milestone reporting to capture that progress.*

As one respondent explained, stalled CARES Act funds previously used for rent and utility support have left many programs scrambling to fill critical gaps. One practitioner stated that the biggest challenge she faces is not finding employers; it's finding a way to cover the overdue rent or utility bill that keeps someone from showing up. These restrictions compound the challenges of delivering comprehensive, trauma-informed services that address both employment and stability needs.

Current funding structures also reinforce staffing constraints and system fragility. Seventy-one (71) survey respondents cited limited staff capacity as moderately to extremely challenging (see Figure 16). Funding volatility forces organizations to operate leanly, reducing their ability to maintain relationships with employers and track long-term outcomes. "We would love to add staff for longer-term follow-up with both employers and participants after employment."

> *It would benefit nonprofits to report on metrics that reflect personal growth, not just 30-, 60-, or 90-day retention. The focus on numbers can become detrimental—the better we do, the fewer people need us, and that shouldn't be seen as failure.*

A common theme across focus groups was that outcome metrics required by funding sources are often misaligned with program lifecycles and the realities of young adults' progress. One expressed frustration that the MIT Living Wage, an aspirational job placement wage outcome, has recently evolved into an unrealistic baseline expectation for program participants being placed in entry level positions. Another focus group member noted:

Taken together, these findings reveal a system constrained by short-term, categorical funding. This is notable because funding structures ultimately shape which strategies organizations can sustain, refine, or scale. In contrast, flexible funding can act as a catalyst for both innovation and equity. Jobs for the Future (2023) highlights California's High Road Training Fund as an example, showing how flexible models allow programs to respond to regional labor market needs, encourage experimentation, and improve equity in workforce outcomes. Expanding funding duration and flexibility would help organizations bring more intentionality to their work to better meet the evolving needs of young adults and employers alike.

4

New & Innovative Practices

Workforce organizations serving young adults demonstrate resilience and adaptability in the face of ongoing challenges, continuing to innovate and strengthen their strategies to respond to a changing labor market. Survey and focus group findings point to a field that remains grounded in strong relational practice while advancing how they prepare young adults for work.

Programs are adapting to current contexts, including integrating new technologies, expanding apprenticeships, strengthening soft-skills instruction, and responding to rising interest in entrepreneurship. At the same time, they are sharpening how they engage employers and embed young adult voice, recognizing both groups as essential partners in designing programs that lead to long-term success. Taken together, these emerging practices reflect a field actively aligning its approaches to better support young adults' long-term success in a shifting economy.

Section Four Key Takeaways

1   **Prioritize soft skills, supports, and system alignment**. Integrating communication, teamwork, mental-health services, childcare, and transportation into workforce programming can enhance retention and economic mobility.

2   **Formalize an organization-wide approach to employer engagement**. Organizations that adopt an intentional, tiered approach to employer engagement—grounded in employer voice, paid work-based learning, dedicated relationship management, and shared competency frameworks—are better positioned to function as true partners in regional talent development rather than simply as job placement intermediaries.

3   **Center youth voice as a core strategy, not symbolism**. Embedding young adult input through advisory councils, alumni roles, and co-governance leads to programs that reflect lived realities and improve outcomes.

4   **Diversifying funding streams strengthens innovation and sustainability.** Workforce organizations can increase financial stability by leveraging fee-based services, social enterprise models, and strategic partnerships that generate flexible revenue, supported work-based learning opportunities, and gaps in wraparound services left by restrictive funding.

5   **Adopt an entrepreneurial, future-ready mindset to effectively support young adults' economic mobility**. Workforce organizations should continually explore, test, and refine new career pathways, training models, and delivery approaches—ensuring programming keeps pace with technological change, emerging industries, and nontraditional routes to employment.

Evolving Approaches to Job Readiness

Findings suggest that organizations are strategically strengthening how they prepare young adults for today's workforce by how they deliver programming, the types of training programs they offer, and shifting programming to emphasize in-demand transferable skills.

Several survey and focus group participants described the many ways they are adapting program delivery to harness new technology and expand programming. By incorporating experiential learning activities, such as virtual job shadowing, employer-produced "day-in-the-life" experiences and videos, virtual reality headsets, and career speed-dating events, programs are expanding awareness of career possibilities and making the connection between program completion, credential attainment, and employment outcomes more tangible. Several of the early adopters noted leveraging AI to help with language acquisition, enhance critical thinking and decision-making, and build fee-based services that support small businesses (see Table 11); more mentioned providing sector-specific training in AI. These strategies help keep programming relevant young adults, help them envision success in fields they might not have otherwise considered, and expand career exploration opportunities to young adults in rural or isolated communities.

TABLE 11: AI USE CASES (N=41)	
Use of AI in Programs	**Mentions**
Write/enhance resumes & cover letters	13
Enhance critical thinking (use AI as a tool, not crutch)	10
Sector-specific application of AI: Arts and Entertainment, Construction, Department of Defense, Entrepreneurship (build and launch business pitches/concepts), Event Planning, Healthcare, Marketing (websites, brand development), Music Industry, Office Administration, Tech (Building AI applications)	10
Standalone course/workshop (online, in-person)	9
Integrated into existing course content	8
Interview prep	5
Career exploration (includes using VR)	4
Career/One-on-one guidance	2
Application review	2
Help with projects/portfolio development	2
Career-readiness	2
Ethical considerations	1
Enhance communication skills	1
Proofreading	1
Guest speakers/employers	1
Job search	1
Decision-making	1
Help with language acquisition	1
To support B2B fee-based professional services for small business	1

Both survey responses and focus groups noted a rise in young adults seeking entrepreneurship training. In response, organizations are expanding career pathway approaches to include entrepreneurship, acknowledging young adults' interest in entrepreneurial work within today's gig economy. Many are expanding foundational work-readiness curricula to include budgeting, marketing, and other business essentials that equip young adults to launch and sustain their own ventures:

> *I find that a lot of the young people that are in our programs actually don't want traditional job models. [They] are veering more entrepreneurial-based and want the opportunity to create their own schedule or work a hybrid, you know, set their own prices for whatever services they want to provide. And so, with our traditional hospitality, where it's more of a 9-to-5, or you go into the restaurant and work weekends, that doesn't always align with their passions. So, we're reimagining what our program looks like to support entrepreneurs and business incubation.*

Survey responses also highlighted a range of creative, nontraditional career pathway programs added since 2020 (see Table 12). Several organizations expanded apprenticeships for young adults with disabilities into sectors not typically associated with apprenticeship models, such as Classroom Assistant and Culinary. Other programs, like Spanish Medical Interpreter, tap into the strengths of multilingual learners, while emerging roles, such as Mortuary Assistant and Clinical Therapist, offer geography-neutral career options that are expected to grow significantly in the coming decades.

TABLE 12: SELECT EXAMPLES OF EMERGING PROGRAM ADDITIONS SINCE 2020 (SINGLE MENTIONS IN THE SURVEY) (N=85)

Other Examples of Programs Added Since 2020		
Barista Training	Google IT	Securities Industry Essentials (SEI) Exam Preparation
Building Mantenance	Industry Management Track	Spanish Medical Interpreter
Classroom Assistant	Maritime Pathways	Sterile Processing Tech
Clinical Therapy	Mortuary Assistant	Summer Trades Academy
Event Planning & Design	Network Administrator (Cybersecurity focus)	Unarmed Security Officer
Facilities Management	Project Management Tools/Software	Website Development (for small business)
Forklift Operator	Robotics/Automation	Welding
Full Stack Software Development	Scrum Certifications	

Another key insight emerging from the data is the importance of soft skills in post-pandemic workforce readiness. Across survey and focus group findings, participants reported that employers value interpersonal effectiveness, teamwork, communication, and professionalism above technical proficiency in entry-level roles. In response, organizations are placing greater emphasis on behavioral and social skill development within their curricula, including opting for in-person programming to simulate real-world workplace dynamics and rebuild the social learning opportunities lost during the pandemic. When asked about programming that has been added in the past five years, two survey respondents specified "soft skills for remote work" (see Table 13).

Overall, the findings indicate that the field recognizes career readiness as both relational and technical. Young adults benefit from programs that blend hands-on career exposure with intentional soft-skills instruction and employer feedback loops. These approaches not only strengthen job placement and retention outcomes but also foster confidence, adaptability, and long-term employability among young adults navigating an evolving labor market.

TABLE 13: MOST FREQUENTLY ADDED PROGRAM AREAS SINCE 2020 (N=85)

New Training Programs	Mentions	New Training Programs	Mentions
Apprenticeship/Pre-Apprenticeships	10	Pharmacy Tech	4
Healthcare (CNA, LPN, phlebotomist)	9	Entrepreneurship	4
Financial Literacy	6	Solar Tech	3
AI Skills Training	6	CDL Training	2
Culinary	5	Fiber Optics	2
Manufacturing/Advanced Manufacturing	5	GED Prep	2
Customer Service	4	Professional/Soft Skills for Remote Work	2
Digital Literacy	4		

Mobilizing Employers for Next Level Engagement

Findings indicate that organizations recognize the importance of practices that strengthen and modernize their employer partnerships in response to rapidly shifting labor market demands. Across survey and focus group findings, a small subset of providers are moving beyond traditional job fairs or ad hoc connections toward deeper, more strategic collaboration with employers. While survey responses indicate a high proportion of youth serving organizations prioritize employer engagement activities fostering stronger participant placements, a small subset shared practices that demonstrate they are positioning themselves not just as program providers, but as key contributors in regional talent development.

Programs also recognize the importance of effective employer engagement strategies for connecting young adults to jobs, in ways that align closely with existing research. For example, 100 respondents (n=145) rated work-based learning opportunities as effective in engaging employers (see Figure 23). When employers are actively engaged in co-designing work-based learning opportunities, there is a greater likelihood of alignment with employer-defined skill needs and achieving the strongest results (Spaulding et al., 2020). One focus group member described how approaching workplace performance issues as partners makes their internship successful in the eyes of young adults:

> *We did a mixed methods study with our participants last year to find out what they identified as the best thing that helped them the most to maintain and get a job. And so they identified the internship program that we do…We provide them internships with employers that we know and trust, and who agree to mentorship. And what that means is, not only are they doing the job, but the employer agrees that if the participant messes up in any way, we are informed, and as a group, we meet together. And so then it becomes a learning opportunity versus being fired.*

Facilitating connections between employers and young people	15	22	104	4
Providing work-based learning opportunities	10	15	100	20
Connecting young workers directly with employers	10	31	97	7
Promoting success stories and outcomes to employers	30	30	72	12
Customized training programs co-designed with employers	18	14	68	43

■ Not Effective/Somewhat Effective ■ Moderately Effective ■ Mostly Effective/Extremely Effective ■ NA=Not Applicable/Not Offered

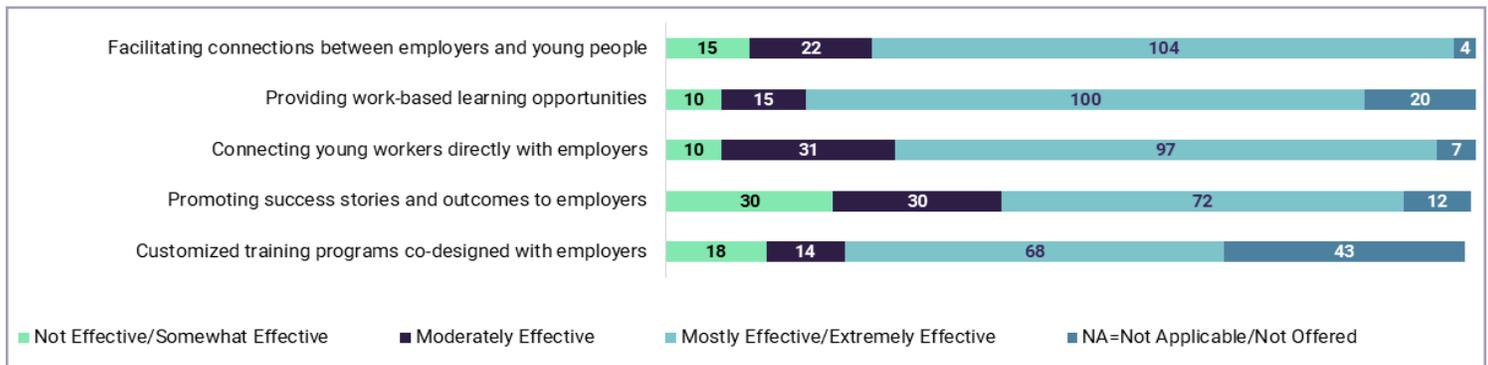**FIGURE 23**: SERVICES THAT EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE EMPLOYERS (N=145)

Building Trust and Belonging through Community-Embedded Training

Homewood Community Engagement Center (Pittsburgh) partners with a local manufacturing training provider to deliver its first month of training inside the neighborhood it serves. The program's leaders intentionally avoided a "big ribbon cutting" or grant launch, choosing instead to build credibility through consistent presence and follow-through.

"That neighborhood has been hit with so many people with big hearts and big pockets — and when the money stopped, they disappeared. That doesn't build trust. We're doing the hard work of training people and getting them jobs."

Why it works

This place-based, relationship-driven model rebuilds community trust by prioritizing long-term presence and authentic engagement over publicity.

Workforce organizations are strengthening and diversifying their approaches to employer engagement, building on traditional models while piloting deeper forms of partnership. For example, research participants reported continued innovation in work-based learning and job-readiness training, alongside a growing interest in expanding apprenticeships into nontraditional sectors such as early childhood education and culinary arts.

At the same time, several organizations report developing sector-based employer consortia that coordinate hiring, training, and skill standards across multiple firms, creating more consistent expectations and clearer pathways into high-wage, high-growth industries. Focus group participants emphasized the value of tiered employer engagement models that intentionally move relationships from one-off interactions to deeper, more strategic collaboration. Across survey and focus group participants, promising practices share several defining features:

Formalizing Employer Voice

Many organizations are creating structured avenues for employer input through advisory councils, regular feedback sessions, and shared labor market data reviews to keep training aligned with industry needs.

Embedding Paid Work-Based Learning

Organizations are integrating paid internships, apprenticeships, and pre-apprenticeships directly into program design to create clear pathways to full-time employment, with some even bringing these opportunities in-house so participants gain paid experience that increases their value to employers.

Designating Employer Engagement Staff

Dedicated relationship managers are increasingly responsible for maintaining employer partnerships, collecting feedback, and coordinating post-placement support using shared data systems that strengthen accountability.

Using Shared Competency Frameworks

Finally, adopting common language around essential workplace skills helps organizations connect youth strengths with employer expectations. This shift positions organizations as translators between young adults and employers, helping both sides recognize the value of emerging skills and new work priorities:

> *"We've been moving in the direction of using the NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers) career competencies as common skills and language on job descriptions. So, in addition to all the usual sections, we now ask our campus employers to indicate the top skills (needed)… When a job is called like office assistant or something, nobody knows what that means…Students may not have the same frame of reference for some of the more jargony pieces. So trying to make some of this a little bit more spelled out and explicit, using shared language around communication, leadership, and teamwork to better connect youth skills with employer expectations. This shift highlights a broader trend: organizations are acting as translators between young adults and employers, helping both sides recognize the value of emerging skills and new work priorities.*

These promising practices reflect advances in intentional, partnership-driven employer engagement. Organizations are taking steps to build trust, structure, and shared accountability into their employer relationships, supporting stronger employment outcomes while reshaping workforce systems themselves. True partnership takes time and sustained collaboration that, when achieved, delivers measurable value for both employers and young adults while driving inclusive regional economic growth and long-term mobility.
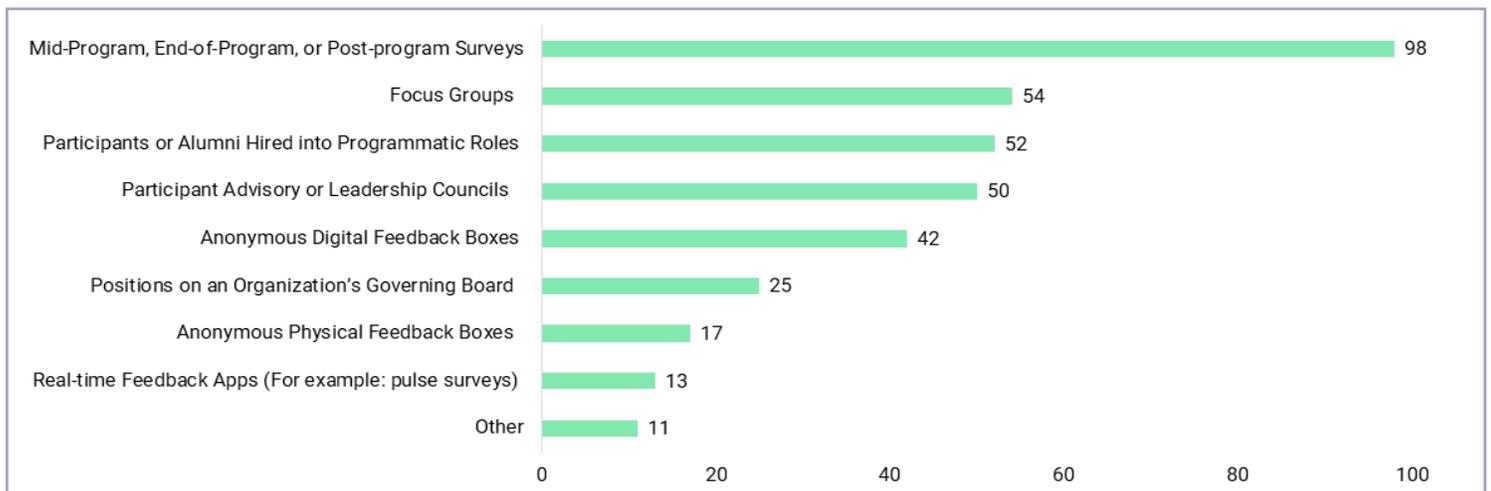
FIGURE 24: YOUNG ADULT FEEDBACK MECHANISMS (N=130)

Centering The Voices of Young Adults

Survey findings reveal that organizations are embedding young adult voice into their strategic and programmatic decision-making in meaningful ways. Most respondents (75%, n=130) gather feedback through surveys, while 42% conduct focus groups and 38% engage youth advisory councils to inform organizational strategy. Notably, 40% of those who responded extend this commitment by hiring program participants or alumni into formal roles, ensuring that lived experience shapes design and delivery.

Beyond gathering input, organizations are actively using young adult feedback to drive continuous improvement (90%), guide program design (74%), strengthen program evaluation (69%), and refine participant recruitment strategies (62%) (see Figure 24). These results underscore a growing shift toward co-creation and accountability, where young adults are not only consulted but serve as key partners in shaping programs that better reflect their goals, needs, and aspirations.

Across the field, there is growing recognition that incorporating young adult voice is a system necessity. Survey and focus group findings suggest that there is room for organizations to diversify and deepen the mechanisms used to capture and integrate young adult perspectives into strategic and programmatic decision-making.

While many organizations rely on short-term inputs such as surveys and focus groups, a small percentage have institutionalized structures, like youth advisory councils or seats on governance boards, that embed young people as long-term partners in organizational leadership. One research participant shared that they have several young adults who serve on a national advisory council. Another shared a progressive model for youth voice:

> *We actually employ our own youth to work in our center, and we do it multiple ways. The first thing we do is we involve them in our Youth Leadership Council, and they commit to a year being involved in the Council, and we have between 15 to 25 youth involved in the council. From there they should go on to be peer navigators, where they work…They're the face of the center. They're the ones that do the initial steps of the intake…Peer mentoring is the next step upon that. So if they go on to college, we work with our local community college so that they can do their work and study here. And they can peer mentor others into going to college themselves. And then the last step of that is peer ambassadorship as they get on towards the end of their pathway, and they've had some milestone successes behind them… [Ambassadors] get a flat stipend per month, and they come back and they teach the other youth…how to get where they're going.*

Survey data also reveals opportunities for growth in terms of how young adult feedback is utilized. Only 47 respondents reported using young adult feedback to shape policy or advocacy efforts. Peer-learning platforms that highlight how organizations like Capital IDEA and the Center for Employment Opportunities engage participants and alumni in policy and systems change could offer a practical roadmap for others looking to strengthen youth voice. Similarly, only 61 organizations reported using youth input to guide employer partnerships or industry engagement strategies; a missed opportunity given the success of collaborative approaches such as California's High-Road Training Partnership, which brings workers and employers together to co-design solutions and balance power in project governance (see Figure 25).

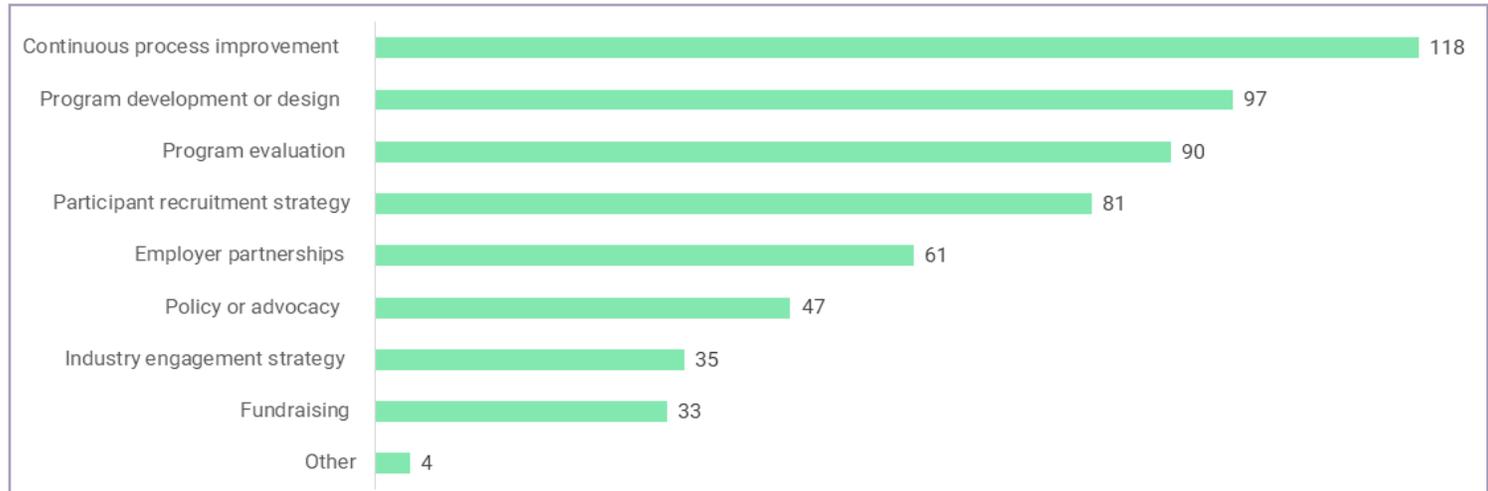|	Value
Continuous process improvement	118
Program development or design	97
Program evaluation	90
Participant recruitment strategy	81
Employer partnerships	61
Policy or advocacy	47
Industry engagement strategy	35
Fundraising	33
Other	4

FIGURE 25: HOW YOUNG ADULT FEEDBACK IS USED (N=131)

Qualitative insights reinforce the importance of aligning youth feedback with employer engagement and career

readiness frameworks. For example, focus group participants emphasized the importance of long-term career coaching and navigation supports, particularly for young adults transitioning from school to work. Several organizations now provide case management that extends for up to five years post-placement, recognizing that barriers like housing, childcare, and transportation do not disappear once employment is secured. This mirrors the 2019 Social Finance report, which found that investments in supportive services, funded through Pay-for-Success (PFS) strategies, reduce turnover, strengthen employer profitability, and improve job retention outcomes.

Similarly, literature from Child Trends (2021) illustrates the power of sustained engagement through Hartford's Generation Work, which activated a two-year, 24-member young adult advisory council to shape organizational priorities and programming. The effort strengthened trust between youth and local employers, demonstrating how long-term participation builds both program relevance and community connection.

Taken together, these insights reveal a clear path forward. Organizations that institutionalize youth participation,

> *The Using Artificial Intelligence in the Workplace course has increased digital confidence among students, helping them leverage AI tools for résumé writing, job searching, and workplace productivity. Overall, these programs have boosted engagement, improved job readiness, and positioned young adults to be more competitive in a rapidly changing workforce.*

co-design with employers, and invest in ongoing career navigation supports are better positioned to drive lasting economic mobility. The opportunity now lies in moving from episodic engagement to structural inclusion, ensuring that young adult voice, equity, and lived experience become the foundation for how workforce systems are designed, funded, and evaluated.

> *"I think the students like it but also are indifferent."*
>
> *"More and more tools integrate AI, so they need to be knowledgeable about it, whether we like it or not."*

Experimenting with AI in Workforce Programming

Among workforce organizations, there is a growing curiosity about how artificial intelligence (AI) can be applied to workforce development—but also a clear gap between interest and implementation capacity. More than half of respondents (54%, n=144) said they see value in using AI to enhance programming or services yet lack the skills or staff capacity to determine how to do so effectively. Another 11% (n=144) reported seeing no clear role for AI in

> *We have also heard from employers who are like, 'We want people to be able to use AI when they show up on day one.' But then I say things like, 'Which AI? To do what?' And it doesn't seem like employers have a really strong sense of what they want. It's just like they should be able to do AI. So that's sort of another like vagueness that we're trying to work on, because I'm like, okay, I'll train my students to be ready for that. If you tell me what you want them to be ready with.*

their work, and two-thirds (66%, n=143) indicated they are not yet offering AI-related skills training to participants.

At the same time, early experimentation with AI suggests potential benefits. Of the ten organizations (n=54) that have introduced AI into their programming since 2020, six described the addition as effective or highly effective in preparing young adults for employment. One organization reported that integrating AI and entrepreneurial training boosted engagement and job readiness:

The U.S. Department of Labor (2025), in TEGL 03-25, underscores the importance of AI literacy and encourages workforce programs to integrate AI skill-building into training. However, this guidance comes with no funding or resources to skill-up practitioners. It is in this context, that many workforce organizations report uncertainty about AI's relevance to their mission. Several survey participants expressed ambivalence or difficulty assessing its impact:

This variation may indicate differing levels of intentionality in adoption. Some organizations are responding to sector-specific demand and aligning AI training with employer needs, while others have incorporated AI reactively, driven more by its popularity than by clear outcomes or workforce alignment (see Table 14).

To make matters more challenging, some employers are sending strong signals that applicants with AI experience are highly desired but are unable to further define this expectation in a way that practitioners can accommodate:

TABLE 14: PROGRAM SUPPORT SERVICES/ENHANCEMENTS ADDED SINCE 2020 (N=85)	
New or Increased Program Supports/Enhancements	**Mentions**
Increased job readiness supports (mock interviews, resume prep, application assistance, etc.)	17
Added or increased work-based learning opportunities (internships, apprenticeships, etc.)	16
Digital literacy/AI skill building	12
Virtual/hybrid programming options	10
Financial education/coaching	8
Increased employer engagement activities (job fairs, industry partnerships, etc.)	7
Added or increased mental health supports	6
Entrepreneurship supports	5
Increased coaching/case management	5
Online job-readiness (online application assistance, online interview prep, etc.)	5
Basic needs (food, housing, transportation, etc.)	3
Social/emotional skill-building	3
Alumni programming/supports	2
GED/HiSET	2
Leadership development	2
Mentorships	2
English Language Learner supports/resources	1
Financial incentives	1

According to survey data, AI appears far from mainstream within youth workforce services. Only five organizations listed AI among their most effective offerings for preparing young adults for employment (n=137), while 51 named it the least effective (n=114) (see Figures 26 and 27). Among those citing AI as least effective, 24 reported staff shortages, 11 pointed to outdated digital literacy among staff, and 13 noted insufficient or outdated technology infrastructure as barriers. A few organizations (4) said they wanted to expand AI offerings but lacked resources, with one explaining the need for "more in-depth training on using AI when applying to jobs."

These patterns suggest that most workforce organizations remain in the early stages of AI exploration. Many operate in sectors where AI has limited current application to entry-level roles (see Table 15: Comparison of Top Sectors of Employer Partners and Young Adult Employment), and few have the funding, digital infrastructure, or technical knowledge to fully realize AI's potential. At the same time, early adopters' experiences indicate that, when implemented with clear purpose and adequate support, AI integration can strengthen engagement, confidence, and digital readiness—skills increasingly essential in a transforming labor market (see Table 11).

TABLE 15: Comparison of Top Sectors of Employer Partners and Young Adult Employment	
Most Frequently Selected Employer Partnerships by Sector	**Most Frequently Selected Industries Young Adults Most Frequently Obtain Jobs**
Health Related Services (63 mentions)	Accommodation and Food Service (42 mentions)
Building and Construction Trades (50 mentions)	Health Related Services (38 mentions)
Accommodation and Food Service (45 mentions)	Building and Construction Trades (38 mentions)
Retail/Sales/Customer Service (31 mentions)	Retail/Sales/Customer Service (30 mentions)
Manufacturing (31 mentions)	Manufacturing (26 mentions)

Broader labor market trends underscore both the relevance and urgency of this work. According to **Deloitte's 2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey**, 6 in 10 young adults are already using generative AI tools like ChatGPT or Claude, but only a third say they've received enough training. There is curiosity and excitement, but also anxiety: 60% of these young adults fear being replaced by automation. These findings point to the importance of building young adults' confidence and ability to apply generative AI tools to a variety of work and personal settings is essential if they want to remain viable in today's labor market.

One survey respondent described how their organization is responding, "We provide transferable AI skills training to participants in our digital literacy (marketing, outreach, event support and administrative) to support small business owners across sectors. Job seekers and those looking to advance in the workforce must know how to leverage AI beyond a consumer experience, i.e. writing a resume."

FIGURE 26: RATED MOST EFFECTIVE SUPPORTIVE SERVICES (N=137)

FIGURE 27: RATED LEAST EFFECTIVE SUPPORTIVE SERVICES (N=114)

Innovating Funding and Program Models

Some organizations are diversifying revenue through earned-income strategies. Twenty-one (21) organizations reported generating 1–25% of their revenue through fee-for-service or social enterprise models, offering professional development, technical assistance, or employer upskilling; two organizations rely solely on fee-based services as their funding source (see Table 3). One survey respondent described training young adults to provide fee-based marketing, outreach, event support, and administrative services to support small business owners across sectors.

Focus group participants added more details on the fee-based services they are providing:

> "So an individual may need a specialized skill or a specialized focus on a specific machine technology. We'll work with the customer and that company to customize and tailor a curriculum around upskilling and improving the skills of that individual employee. And that's a fee-for-service product of ours."

> "NC Biotech does the admin side of things for the apprenticeship consortium, so we have twelve companies who are part of it. They pay a small fee to be part of it, and we connect them with Apprenticeship NC."

> "If the company downsizes, and a [program graduate] gets dislocated, they're welcome to come back. We rebuild their resume with all the new [work experience], and we're willing to put them out to partner companies. And the companies appreciate it so much. They're willing to pay a small fee for a placement. So if an individual goes to those companies and they stay for 30 days or longer, [companies] authorize us to invoice them a small fee. It's not the fee for the total portion of our cost for the program, but it's a small amount, so that we can go back to our funders and say, 'You know, our manufacturers have a stake in the game because they're paying for the value of getting a good entry level machinist.'"

Several focus group participants also referenced co-locating with other agencies and organizations serving young adults as a cost sharing measure. This approach creates efficiencies of scale and removes transportation as a barrier because young adults can visit multiple service providers in a single trip.

Best Practices Feature

Digitizing Manufacturing Processes for Consistency and Inclusion

AZ Career Pathways uses tablet devices to digitize work-based manufacturing processes, providing step-by-step guidance for learners. This digital approach standardizes production training, ensuring consistent, high-quality instruction across participants and instructors.

Each tablet includes clear procedures and safety protocols that can be translated into multiple languages, making the tool accessible to multilingual learners and minimizing bias in instruction. By combining digital and hands-on learning, this model promotes efficiency, inclusion, and replicability—helping participants build confidence and competence in real-world manufacturing environments.

Why it works
This approach standardizes instruction while reducing learner anxiety, allowing participants to review materials independently and at their own pace. The technology also models how AI-driven tools can support inclusive, data-informed, and replicable instruction in technical training environments.

Expanding & Evolving Training Pathways

Organizations continue to expand and adapt offerings in response to evolving labor market and participant needs. Since 2020, 64 organizations have added new training programs, most commonly in apprenticeships (10), healthcare (9), and AI or digital literacy (10 combined), to align with evolving labor market demands (see Tables 12 and 13). Thirty-four (34) organizations reported expanding support services in the past five years. Thirteen (13) expanded relational touchpoints, such as additional career coaches, case managers, financial coaches, mentors, and mock interviews, and 10 added virtual and hybrid activities, both of which are indicative of organizations flexing to meet the needs of young adults in real time (see Table 14).

It is worth noting that several survey respondents have added new career pathway training options for young adults with special needs, such as programming in advanced manufacturing for neurodiverse learners, construction craft laborer, tax preparer certification, and an Early Childhood Education apprenticeship Organizations indicated that they are leaning into technology. A few referenced technology and virtual programming as a means of increasing access to career exploration activities, such as job shadowing or internships, for young adults in less populated areas. Two organizations also reported in the survey using virtual reality headsets to offer immersive career exploration experiences across 80 occupations. One focus group member shared a similar approach to using VR technology:

> *Our workforce board brought in virtual reality headsets. These are used to give youth a fun experience to explore occupations. We have over 80 careers, from surgeon to truck driver, they can try out. Very helpful in the advancement of technology. It's a gamified version of job shadowing. Like, you put on the virtual reality glasses and you could be, like, a surgeon or replacing, like, a lamp on top of a building. Like, for this power plant, like, you power up the whole city? And you put on these glasses, and you're, like, going up there on the ladder, you replace a lamp, and you see the city power going on again.*

Another described how his organization has digitized work-based manufacturing processes using tablet devices to standardize production outputs for program participants:

> "We've digitized some of our work processes onto tablets. On a tablet, you're getting more people understanding that this just isn't for Snapchat, for Facebook and LinkedIn and whatnot. This is a device that actually can hold valuable steps and processes to make you successful in understanding how to produce a component in a safe and effective way. And it's repeatable. And it's a non-biased tool. So on this device we create non-biased procedures on how to create some of our [manufacturing] project components."

Best Practices Feature

Preparing Neurodiverse Learners for Careers in Advanced Manufacturing

Community Integrated Services (CIS) is piloting an innovative training-to-career pathway that prepares autistic young adults to launch successful careers in the advanced manufacturing industry.

Developed in partnership with Drexel University, Goodwin College of Professional Studies, the School District of Philadelphia, Uniquely Abled Academy, and the Community College of Philadelphia, this initiative provides specialized training optimized for neurodiverse learners.

Program graduates gain the skills and credentials needed for high-demand manufacturing roles such as CNC machine operators, machinists, inventory control specialists, and laser technicians. By combining inclusive design with strong employer partnerships, CIS and its collaborators are expanding equitable access to well-paying, future-oriented careers in manufacturing.

Why It Works
This initiative demonstrates how inclusive program design and cross-sector collaboration can open access to high-growth careers for underrepresented populations. By tailoring instruction and supports to neurodiverse learners and directly linking training to employer demand, CIS ensures that participants are both prepared for and connected to meaningful employment, creating a replicable model for equitable workforce development.

Real-Time Program Adaptation to Labor Market Shifts

Generation WV in West Virginia quickly adapted its training offerings after local tech hiring declined. Initially focused on software development, with an 85% placement rate, it pivoted to data analytics and other emerging roles based on state-level industry discussions and real-time labor market data.

"We started with a software development program… then the bottom fell out. We've shifted to data analytics, which is working well. We're now in a statewide discussion about where the industry is growing and what pathways need to look like."

Why it works
This example demonstrates data-informed program redesign, ensuring training remains aligned with local labor market demand and maintaining participant employability in a shifting economic landscape.

Research Implications and Recommendations

Workforce organizations across the country are doing extraordinary work to support young adults. Simultaneously, the challenges they face—including limited funding, rising participant needs, employer hesitancy, and rapidly changing skill demands—require coordinated action across practitioners, funders, and policymakers. This section distills the most powerful insights from the research into targeted recommendations for each stakeholder group. Alongside each recommendation, we identify why it matters to achieve long-term impact and offer practical resources to help the field move from ideas to implementation. Together, these strategies outline a path toward a more resilient, youth-centered, and equitable workforce ecosystem capable of meeting the realities of today's labor market and the aspirations of young adults.

Key Insights and Recommendations for Workforce Practitioners

1   **Establish an Organizational Employer Engagement Continuum**

Many workforce organizations reported high levels of employer engagement but varying degrees of depth and sustainability. While most maintain regular contact through hiring events or internships, fewer have structured systems to gather feedback, co-design training, or measure long-term outcomes. This limits opportunities to demonstrate mutual value and align programming with real-time labor market shifts.

Recommendation
Formalize your organization's employer engagement strategies by establishing a "Continuum of Engagement" that meets businesses where they are. For each stage along your continuum, define engagement activities, who owns the relationship at that stage, existing business partners who fall into that category, and the goal of that level.

Why This Matters
Going beyond surface-level employer engagement nurtures employer champions committed to your mission and willing to use their power and prestige to sustain and expand their partnerships with you. Having a formal approach to employer engagement provides staff with a guide on what engagement should look like at each level.

Resources to Get You Started
Disability Employment TA Center's (2022) and **New York City's models** aligns with **Jobs for the Future's**, a tiered model that nurtures business partners through different phases. Other organizations see the model more as a series of categories: employers fit into a single category, based on their opportunities and constraints. For other actionable tips and resources, see **CSW's The ACE-UP College & Employer Partnership Action Guide**.

2   **Embed Youth Voice in Program Design and Governance**

Most organizations use surveys and focus groups that collect participant feedback. While a helpful tool, relying on them alone can result in improvements that reflect past experiences rather than the needs of current or future participants. In addition, the feedback may not fully capture participant priorities, lead to misinterpreting data without full context, and can fail to anticipate future needs.

Recommendation
Embed young adult voice as a built-in part of program design and governance by establishing structures such as youth advisory councils, alumni staff roles, and designated governance seats to ensure lived experience consistently informs organizational decisions.

Why This Matters
With young adults as active partners, this structural and intentional inclusion builds trust, relevance, and accountability in programming. Rather than a snapshot, embedding youth voice offers continuous, in-depth feedback and authentic, lived perspectives that can drive policy and program changes. Ongoing youth input provides just-in-time context and solutions and can also drive insights into addressing ongoing programmatic challenges like program retention and alumni engagement. As a bonus, this approach affords young adults the chance to foster leadership and soft skills.

Resources to Get You Started
Urban Institute's toolkit, **Elevating Youth Worker Voice: A Practical Guide for Organizations Supporting Young People in Their Transition to the Workplace**, offers specific strategies, tips, and resources to help organizations elevate youth voice while supporting young adults' transition to the workforce. The Harvard Center for Digital Thriving published the **Youth Voice Playbook**, a collaborative effort that includes comprehensive guidance around youth participatory action research (YPAR), including how to prepare, ethics and laws, budgets and resources,

recruitment, designing activities, facilitation, documentation and reflection, making sense of the findings, and closing and sharing. Finally, Youth Move National created a validated, fee-based tool, the **Young Adult Voice at Agency Level (Y-VAL)**, that assess the level of youth voice within your organization or a committee or council.

3   Integrate AI with Intentionality

Growing interest from survey respondents in AI and digital tools suggests readiness for innovation, but practitioners lack the time, training, and digital infrastructure to integrate these tools effectively. Yet with nearly 628,000 job postings in 2024 demanding at least one AI skill, according to Galeano et al. at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta (2025), practitioners are under intense pressure to add AI into programming regardless of staff readiness or relevance to programming goals. This has resulted in surface AI inclusion or AI training that does not resonate with young adults.

Recommendations
Use a scaled approach to integrating AI into your programming if you are in the earlier stages of adoption. Pilot AI and automation tools that improve program efficiency, such as automating scheduling, résumé feedback, mock interviews or administrative tasks, before expanding into AI-based skill training. Partner with local employers or education and training providers to align AI training with industry-specific applications.

Why This Matters
Six in ten young adults report already using gen AI at work, but only a third say they've received enough training. As workforce practitioners strive to build relevant workplace skills for program participants, this represents a significant training gap. Additionally, workforce organizations are being pulled into AI adoption faster than their internal capacity can support. At the same time, the labor market is shifting rapidly, signaling that young adults will increasingly need exposure to AI-related competencies. Without a paced, intentional approach, organizations risk offering AI content that is superficial, misaligned with employer needs, or disconnected from young adults' interests. A scaled, strategic integration ensures that AI enhances program quality and supports young adults' long-term employability rather than becoming an added burden.

Resources to Get You Started
NYC's Workforce Professional Training Institute (WPTI) recently released **Harnessing AI Responsibly in Workforce Development: an 18-point guide for nonprofits** (2025), a practical roadmap for skilling up practitioners, programs, policies, and operations to meet demand for AI skills, while **research from Jobs for the Future** highlights current and potential uses for generative AI in workforce development. The National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB) has partnered with Microsoft to offer free online **"Generative AI for the Workforce"** training that helps career coaches build AI skills and integrate AI tools into their training content, with the added benefit of streamlining administrative tasks so staff can spend more time with job seekers. **Usher's New Look (UNL)** and IBM provide free tech-centric career readiness training for young adults and practitioner resources through IBM's **SkillsBuild platform**, while Google's free **Interview Warmup** tool (part of Grow with Google) helps participants practice AI-enabled interview preparation. For those trying to keep up with rapid changes in AI and its impact on work, Workforce Matters maintains an AI resources list and clearinghouse specifically curated for workforce development practitioners (**Workforce Matters AI Resources List**).

4   Support Staff and Participants' Mental Health

It is evident from both survey responses and focus group discussions that the field is experiencing increasingly higher levels of stress and trauma due to greater economic uncertainty, political polarization, and significant cuts to funding and staff. In addition, research participants described a significant increase in the need for mental health supports for young adults. Practitioners are already supporting young adults through trauma-informed practices and relational approaches, but who is supporting the supporters?

Recommendation
Cultivate a culture of resiliency by adopting organizational trauma-informed practices and policies.

Why This Matters
Practitioners are navigating rising levels of stress, secondary trauma, and burnout at the same time young adults' needs, especially for mental health support, are increasing. Even when staff are trained in trauma-informed and resilience-building practices, they cannot consistently apply them without an organizational culture that reinforces those same principles. High caseloads, limited resources, and constant exposure to participants' trauma create conditions for toxic stress, while workplace factors such as unclear communication, pressure to prioritize productivity over well-being, and insufficient supervision further erode resilience. Organizational adoption of trauma-informed policies is therefore essential, not only to protect staff, but to ensure program quality and the consistent relational support young adults rely on.

Resources to Get You Started
CSW's Trauma & Resilience Quick Guides contains four sections that cover the brain science of trauma and resilience, how trauma shows up in workforce development, a framework for responding to trauma in real time, and cultivating a culture of resiliency in organizations. The Center for Disease Control's **Total Worker Health Toolkit** includes workplace wellness assessments for workers and for organizations. A joint effort from CSW and InsideTrack, **From Crisis to Resilience**, is another practical guide that addresses trauma and toxic stress in workplaces.

Key Insights and Recommendations for Funders

Meet Organizations Where They Are

The diversity among participating organizations in size, age, scope, geography, and funding composition, underscores the challenge of applying uniform performance expectations across the field. Many workforce organizations operate with small staff, limited budgets, or cross-jurisdictional service areas that don't align neatly with standard reporting systems. Without contextualizing these structural factors, funders risk misinterpreting performance data and overlooking the organizational strengths that enable local impact.

1　**Recommendations**
Develop grant making and evaluation frameworks that account for organizational contexts, such as staff size, budget, service geography, and target populations, when assessing outcomes. Consider creating a "capacity continuum" with categories that consider grantee context with corresponding supports, including those beyond direct funding, they may need to enhance capacity and maximize their impact.

Why This Matters
Staff size, budget constraints, service geography, and the complexity of participant populations all shape what an organization can realistically achieve and how outcomes should be interpreted. Without accounting for these contextual factors, funders may unintentionally compare high-capacity, well-resourced organizations with small, community-based providers serving young adults with more intensive barriers. This can penalize organizations doing some of the most relationally intensive, equity-driven work. Context-aware frameworks create a more accurate, fair, and actionable understanding of performance, allowing funders to invest in organizations' strengths, set realistic expectations, identify capacity needs, and make comparisons that genuinely reflect program effectiveness rather than structural differences.

Resources to Get You Started
The Walton Foundation's **Grantee Capacity-building Practice: Review and Recommendations for Accelerating Impact** report provides an example of a framework that takes organizational context into account; the appendix

provides sample capacity-building metrics. Another example is The Annie E. Casey Foundations **Indirect Cost Rate Policy,** a tiered approach to assigning indirect cost rates to project grants based on grantees' budget size. Section 3 of the Fund for Shared Insight's **Participatory Philanthropy Toolkit** (2025) discusses how funders can be more open to communities' definitions of geographic boundaries.

2   Fund Full Costs of Service Delivery

Workforce organizations are being asked to deliver high-quality, long-term outcomes for young adults, often while operating with unstable, short-term, and highly restricted funding. More than 100 organizations cited funding volatility as a primary challenge. Year-to-year contracts conflict with the multi-year (2−4 year) youth development lifecycle, and restricted grants prevent providers from covering the true cost of services—especially critical supports like transportation, childcare, mental health, housing assistance, and sustained case management. Limited funding also constrains organizations' capacity to build staff capacity, maintain employer partnerships, or invest in data systems needed to measure impact.

Recommendations

Fund the full cost of service delivery by providing flexible , and unrestricted grants that include funding for administrative expenses, data infrastructure, staff development, and wraparound supports. Adopt a "total cost of ownership" approach that accounts for the real resources required to deliver workforce services, including post-placement support for at least six months, robust employer engagement, and integrated services that address transportation, childcare, mental health, and housing needs. Finally, work to expand internal funding policies and practices to allow for multi-year funding, so grant timelines align with the multi-year nature of effective workforce programs.

Why This Matters

Youth workforce development is a multi-year process, yet most organizations are funded as if meaningful progress happens in twelve months or less. Without flexible funding, organizations cannot sustain the wraparound supports that drive completion, retention, and advancement, nor can they maintain the staff capacity, data systems, and employer relationships essential for long-term success. Investing in full-cost funding models strengthens organizational stability, supports innovation, and enables providers to implement equitable, youth-centered strategies at the scale needed to improve economic mobility for young adults.

Resources to Get You Started

"Trust-based" grant making works to address power dynamics and structural barriers that get in the way of nonprofits achieving their intended impact. **The Trust-based Philanthropy Project** offers tools and resources funders can use to implement six practices that shift grant making from traditional to trust-based, including giving multi-year, unrestricted funding, simplify and streamline paperwork, and solicit and act on feedback. RVC in Seattle collaborated with their former founder, Vu Le, to develop the **Equitable Grant making Continuum** that outlines a number of funding practices ranging from most equitable to inequitable.

3   Reward Collaboration, Not Competition

Survey respondents emphasized that no single organization can meet the full range of young adults' needs on its own, making strong collaboration essential to achieving lasting outcomes. Yet three interconnected barriers continue to challenge organizations' ability to build and sustain effective partnerships: insufficient staff capacity, lack of sustainable funding, and limited access to deep employer relationships. These challenges are compounded by short-term, highly restricted funding cycles that leave little room for shared planning, coordination, or long-term investment. Focus group participants noted that without multi-year, flexible

funding, organizations are forced to build programs "on the fly" or rely on outdated models, making it difficult to align efforts with partners. As a result, organizations remain stretched thin and duplicate work that could be shared, pointing to clear opportunities to strengthen the collaborative infrastructure needed to fully support young adults.

Recommendations
Incentivize cross-organizational collaboration by supporting consortium and shared-services models—such as co-location, shared data systems, and coordinated employer engagement—that improve efficiency and strengthen collective impact. Provide flexible funding that enables joint planning, innovation, and pilot programs.

Why This Matters
Collaboration allows organizations to pool resources, reduce duplication, and offer a more seamless and comprehensive experience for young adults. Shared-services models also strengthen regional ecosystems by creating consistent data practices, unified employer relationships, and more efficient use of limited funding. By investing in flexible, collaborative structures, funders enable organizations to innovate, streamline services and supports, and achieve stronger and more equitable outcomes at scale. Movement-supporting grantmakers play a critical role as brokers: they can bring co-funders to the table, invest in aligned organizations and their allies, and reduce administrative burden through streamlined applications and reporting. By modeling the very collaboration they ask of grantees, funders help build a more unified, resilient system.

Resources to Get You Started
Nonprofit Finance Fund's **Place-Based Partnership Toolkit** offers guidance to funders on how to support "backbone" organizations, shared infrastructure, and long-term partnership models in local systems. Although the **Community Collaboration Agreement Toolkit** was created for nonprofits, this guide provides templates and practices for structuring multi-organization collaborations that funders can adopt to shape grant terms and agreements; as a bonus, the Toolkit is available in English and Spanish. Finally, a resource for best practices in shared services, financial management and infrastructure funders can reference is the Wallace Foundation's **StrongNonprofits Toolkit**.

4 Expand How Program Success Is Defined: Support Flexible Program Outcomes

A frequent theme across survey respondents and focus group participants is that current funding models rely on narrow, short-term performance measures that capture only a small portion of young adults' progress. These funding models tend to prioritize outcomes such as job placement, credential attainment, or wage thresholds, while overlooking the broader set of indicators that show how young adults actually move toward stability and employment. Practitioners emphasized that success often appears long before a job placement occurs and that different communities need flexibility to collect and use data that reflect local labor markets and participant realities. Meaningful measurement must therefore include engagement, persistence, stabilization, skill development, employer readiness, confidence, and access to supportive services—together representing the real pathway toward lasting economic security.

Recommendation
Adopt flexible, outcome frameworks that allow organizations to define, test, and use a wider range of program measures—including developmental, relational, and system-level indicators—rather than relying solely on standardized placement or wage metrics.

Why This Matters
Flexible outcomes frameworks recognize that workforce success is multidimensional and nonlinear. They allow programs to document meaningful progress that would otherwise remain invisible and reduce pressure to "chase

numbers" that may not reflect participant growth or system impact. They also enable collaboration across education, workforce, housing, and health systems by making it easier to align around common milestones while still honoring different roles. When funders invest in data as a learning tool, not just an accountability mechanism, they strengthen the field's ability to improve practice, coordinate services, and support young adults whose pathways require time, trust, and sustained investment.

Resources to Get You Started
Participatory Philanthropy Toolkit (2025) from the Fund for Shared Insight, offers worksheets and case studies to help funders adopt flexible, power-shifting grant making and evaluation practices. Chapter 4, "Shared Measurement," in the Tamarack Institute's **Collective Impact Toolkit: Shared Measurement** (2023) includes tools for mapping shared outcomes, tracking both intermediate and long-term results, and aligning multiple organizations on common metrics.

5 Fuel Innovation and Digital Capacity

Young adults are increasingly pursuing entrepreneurship, flexible work, and careers in emerging fields, but most funding models remain tied to traditional, prescriptive pathways that do not support these interests. At the same time, workforce organizations are eager to integrate AI and digital tools into career navigation and program delivery, yet lack the time, technical capacity, and infrastructure to do so. Without flexible, innovation-oriented funding, providers cannot adapt programming, pilot new models, or keep pace with rapidly shifting labor market demands.

Recommendations
Create dedicated funding streams for digital transformation, responsible AI adoption, and entrepreneurship-aligned workforce strategies. Provide planning grants that allow organizations and collaboratives the time to co-design, test, and refine new approaches—including flexible career pathways, digital learning tools, and AI-supported navigation systems—before scaling. Prioritize funding for small and mid-sized providers that lack technical infrastructure but serve large numbers of young adults.

Why This Matters
Flexible, innovation-focused funding enables organizations to respond to what young adults actually want: autonomy, purpose, and career pathways that reflect a changing economy. It also positions providers—and the youth they serve—to remain competitive as employers increasingly expect digital fluency and AI readiness but rarely specify what those skills entail. Supporting responsible experimentation ensures technology enhances rather than replaces human connection. When funders invest in experimentation, shared learning, and long-term outcomes, the entire field becomes more agile, equitable, and aligned with emerging economic realities.

Resources to Get You Started
A good starting place is Fund the People's **Guide to Investing in Grantee Talent**, which offers strategies for funders to invest in exploratory, innovation-oriented grants, including planning and capacity-building grants. This classic blog from The Grantsmanship, "**Planning vs. Program Grants – part 1 of 2,**" discusses the differences between how a planning grant might be structured compared to a program grant. For guidance on building nonprofits' AI-capacity, check out **Responsible AI Adoption Framework for Grantmakers** for tips on how to support nonprofits' AI adoption, infrastructure needs, and risk governance. The Bridgespan Group's **Closing the Nonprofit Funding Gap in the Age of AI** (2025) is a great resource to generate buy-in for treating tech infrastructure as core operating cost and to invest accordingly.

Key Insights and Recommendations for Policymakers

1   **Modernize Funding Structures and Outcome Expectations**

Workforce organizations serving young adults increasingly operate across city, county, and state boundaries—often because traditional public systems do not reach rural communities, disconnected youth, or niche populations. Yet funding structures and reporting requirements remain tied to rigid jurisdictional lines and short-term outcome expectations. These misaligned policies force providers into "apples-to-oranges" comparisons, overlook differences in organizational size and population served, and fail to capture the long-term trajectories of young adults whose progress often unfolds over several years. As a result, current policies unintentionally penalize the very organizations filling critical service gaps.

Recommendations

Modernize workforce funding and outcome policy frameworks to reflect how services are delivered and how young adults actually progress. To accomplish this, policymakers should:

- Map and recognize cross-jurisdiction service networks in state and local planning to guide flexible funding models and strengthen coordination across agencies.
- Promote equity in resource allocation by assessing whether state and federal funds are reaching underrepresented or high-barrier youth and prioritizing community-based organizations that serve them.
- Reduce administrative burden by simplifying reporting requirements, adopting standardized performance definitions, and supporting shared data frameworks across systems.
- Align policy timelines with youth development timelines by extending reporting periods and allowing milestone-based progress measures (e.g., credential attainment, housing stability, skill gains, or re-engagement) alongside job placement.

Why This Matters

Modernizing funding and outcome expectations ensures that policy reflects the reality that young adults facing systemic discrimination often need two to four years to stabilize, skill up, and secure meaningful employment, and many providers operate across boundaries because youth needs do not stop at city or county lines. Flexible, equity-centered funding enables organizations to deliver comprehensive supports, sustain employer partnerships, and track long-term outcomes that matter for mobility. Standardized definitions and shared data frameworks reduce duplication, improve comparability, and strengthen accountability across systems. Ultimately, updating policies to match real service delivery creates a more coordinated, equitable, and effective workforce ecosystem—one better positioned to support young adults and meet regional labor market needs.

Resources to Get You Started

Results for America's **Workforce Policy Roadmap** offers actionable strategies for designing flexible awards, aligning contracts with outcomes, simplifying performance metrics, and supporting evidence-based funding. The Brookings Institution just released its **Workforce Development Policy in the U.S.**; Section 5, "Select state programs: Supporting regional and local priorities" offers an extensive analysis of state approaches, structural barriers, and policy levers tied to modernizing workforce systems.

2   **Build Connected Data Infrastructure**

Workforce organizations struggle to track young adults across education, training, and employment systems because data is fragmented, inconsistent, and often dependent on self-reporting. Even as 40 states have adopted State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS), most workforce providers cannot access or contribute to these systems, leaving major gaps in follow-up after a credential is earned or a young adult is placed

in a job. Limited staff capacity, low wages, and inadequate digital infrastructure further constrain organizations' ability to maintain accurate records, analyze outcomes, or coordinate services across agencies.

Recommendation

Strengthen cross-system alignment by expanding secure data sharing between education, workforce, and human services agencies; investing in local data and digital infrastructure; and supporting organizational data literacy. This includes:

- Funding digital participant management systems that automate tracking and improve accuracy.
- Pairing technology investments with professional development to build staff comfort and confidence with data.
- Creating grant programs or technical assistance initiatives that help organizations upgrade digital tools, integrate AI responsibly, and participate in statewide data initiatives.
- Encouraging peer-learning networks that share practices for milestone-based tracking, mental health documentation, and cross-agency collaboration.

Why This Matters

Connected data systems make it possible to understand young adults' full journeys—not just isolated program touchpoints. Without integrated infrastructure, organizations cannot track retention, job quality, or advancement, nor can they coordinate services when young adults move across schools, training providers, or state lines. Stronger data connectivity reduces duplication, improves service navigation, and supports more equitable access to resources. For policymakers, modernized systems yield clearer insights into what works, enabling smarter investment decisions and more accurate measurement of long-term impact. Ultimately, coordinated data infrastructure strengthens the entire workforce ecosystem and ensures young adults receive seamless, continuous support as they pursue meaningful careers.

Resources to Get You Started

The **Driving Improved Workforce Outcomes Through Data** (Jobs for the Future) report outlines key design principles for state agencies, such as shared data systems, hub-and-spoke models, and data infrastructure investments to enable cross-jurisdiction coordination. Education Commission of the States published **The Statewide Longitudinal Data System Landscape** (2024), providing a 50-state comparison of data systems across education and workforce agencies and outlines best practices for governance and integration. **Create an Integrated Data Infrastructure** comes from the National Governors Association's Preparing the Future Workforce Now initiative and offers policy guidance on building P-20W (pre-K to workforce) data systems with examples from states.

3 Leverage Policy to Breathe New Life into Employer Engagement

Survey and focus group findings reveal that while most workforce organizations maintain active employer engagement, traditional incentive models are no longer producing the deeper partnerships required for strong job placement and retention outcomes. Employers—especially small and mid-sized firms—are increasingly reluctant to host interns, convert interns into employees, or hire young adults at all. At the same time, organizations lack structured mechanisms for employers to shape curriculum, define competencies, or provide ongoing feedback on skill gaps and workplace readiness. Administrative burdens, limited employer capacity, and vague definitions of "job-ready" further weaken alignment between training and labor market needs. As economic uncertainty and shifts toward leaner staffing and AI adoption narrow entry-level opportunities, young adults face heightened competition while providers struggle to maintain meaningful employer commitments.

Recommendations

Policymakers can deploy several tactics that would help reinvigorate employer engagement:

- Position state and local government as a model employer and incentivize co-funded employment models that reduce risk for businesses.
- Use the state's convening power to bring employers, educators, and workforce practitioners together to co-design clear, skills-based talent pipelines.
- Promote asset-based framing—positioning workforce programs as strategic talent development partners, not charity—and create incentives for sector partnerships and shared-services models that help employers engage more deeply and consistently.

Why This Matters

A modern economy requires a modern approach to employer engagement. As more sectors face an aging workforce, skill needs shift rapidly, and entry-level opportunities contract, young adults cannot access meaningful work without stronger employer partnerships. Policymakers play a critical role in creating the conditions for those partnerships to flourish. By incentivizing co-funded employment models, reducing administrative burdens, and convening employers and practitioners to co-design talent pipelines, policymakers help transform employer engagement from occasional participation into sustained collaboration. These changes expand high-quality learning and hiring opportunities, strengthen alignment between training and industry needs, and build more reliable, diverse talent pipelines for regional economies.

Resources to Get You Started

Ladders for Leaders is a nationally recognized program that offers summer internships that are co-funded by employers and New York City. Collaboratives created by like-minded businesses, like the **National Talent Collaborative** are natural partners to co-design policies that would reduce barriers or incentivize greater engagement with employment programs for young adults. For a more global perspective on what works, the **Youth Employment Toolkit** is a great compendium for anyone seeking evidence-based guidance on policy and practice to improve youth employment outcomes. (It's based on in-depth literature reviews that draw together best-available international evidence from multiple evaluations of youth employment programs in high-income countries.) Designed for practitioners, the **Workforce Development Employer Engagement Toolkit** is still a great policy resource with practical guidance that supports a continuum of employer engagement.

4 Reduce Administrative Burden for Practitioners and Employer Partners

Workforce policies and reporting systems have not kept pace with labor-market shifts or employer needs. Complex, time-consuming reporting requirements and inconsistent performance definitions create administrative barriers that discourage businesses—particularly small and mid-sized employers—from participating in subsidized wage programs, launching apprenticeships, or accessing tax incentives designed to support young adult hiring. The application process, reporting, and data entry requirements create an administrative burden for practitioners. This burden can reduce their capacity to engage in promising practices like providing the intensive services young adults need capacity, collaborating more deeply with employers, or designing flexible, skills-aligned pathways that reflect how young people learn and work today. Without reducing this burden, employer participation can remain uneven across regions and sectors, limiting the full potential of youth employment strategies.

Recommendation

Streamline and modernize subsidized wage, apprenticeship, and internship policies to significantly reduce administrative burden for employers and service providers.

Why This Matters

When administrative processes are simplified, more employers—especially small businesses—can take advantage of apprenticeship incentives, wage subsidies, and youth hiring tax credits that currently go unused due to complexity. Reducing paperwork and compliance hurdles allows both employers and practitioners to focus on

training and supporting young adults rather than navigating bureaucratic systems. Modern, coordinated policy frameworks will also help youth-serving organizations engage more employers, align training with real-time skill needs, and expand access to high-quality, future-ready career pathways for young adults.

Resources to Get You Started

The Government Accountability Office report, **Observations on Challenges with Access, Use, and Oversight**, shows how federal agencies are implementing methods to standardize data elements, reduce duplication, and automate reporting to lessen burden on grant recipients. The **Learning from State Regulatory Streamlining Efforts** report from the National Governors Association investigates how states have redesigned regulatory systems, including application and reporting workflows, to reduce burden on businesses and nonprofits.

5   Elevate and Integrate Young Adult Voice in Policies and Initiatives

Young adults bring critical insight and lived expertise to workforce systems, yet their perspectives are not consistently reflected in policy design and governance. Survey and focus group data show that while organizations are increasingly embedding youth voice into programming, state and local workforce policies have not kept pace. Current policy frameworks often overlook young adults' lived experiences, including barriers they face in school-to-work transitions, their preference for flexible and purpose-driven career pathways, and the critical role of relationships and work-readiness preparation in long-term success. Creating structured avenues for youth input presents an opportunity to better align strategies, close service gaps, and design programs that more effectively meet young people where they are.

Recommendation

Champion youth co-design models by embedding young adult advisory roles within local workforce boards, economic development councils, and state workforce planning efforts.

Why This Matters

Elevating young adult voice is not just a moral commitment to inclusion but a practical strategy for improving decision quality, program relevance, and policy impact. Young adults bring firsthand insight into the barriers and opportunities within education, training, and the workplace, helping policymakers address practical gaps in readiness, supports, and service delivery. When youth are engaged as co-designers, states gain clearer visibility into what works: specifically, which work-readiness activities matter, how relational supports influence persistence, and where systems inadvertently create friction. Embedding lived experience into governance builds stronger community buy-in, strengthens soft-skills development as a foundation for long-term mobility, and helps public systems align with the evolving values and aspirations of today's young adults. It also galvanizes young adults' eagerness to contribute to system improvement, cultivating a new, civically engaged constituency while leading to more effective, equitable, and future-ready workforce policy.

Resources to Get You Started

The National Governors Association created a helpful guide for incorporating youth voice into policymaking, **Of the Youth, For the Youth, By the Youth: A Governor's Guide for Incorporating Youth Voice into Policymaking**, which includes lessons learned, frameworks, recommendations, and examples of how states embedded youth advisors directly into project teams. Finally, Facilitating Powers' **The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership** is considered a foundational guide to address power dynamics and move youth voice from tokenistic to authentic.

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CSW is a national workforce policy and systems change nonprofit that partners with government, business, and community leaders to develop good jobs and the skilled workers to fill them. Since 1991, CSW has provided high impact strategic planning, program development, and evaluation assistance to state, regional, and local partners. We catalyze change in educational and labor market systems, policies, and practices to increase economic mobility, particularly for people of color and others historically excluded from economic success.

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