



Workforce
Benchmarking
Network

Reimagining Workforce Development at All Star Code with the Workforce Benchmarking Network (WBN)

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Introduction

Direct service workforce organizations face the challenge of connecting job seekers to quality employment while providing employers with qualified applicants. These organizations grapple with job seekers who require support for a multitude of basic needs—including housing, mental health, and food—as well as a job market that is continually in flux. To be successful, it is essential that workforce providers have an ongoing understanding of the results of their work and the internal capacity to use evidence (program data, information on effective practice, etc.) as a tool for continuous improvement. Most providers report outcomes in isolation, using definitions and measures shaped by individual funders or compliance requirements. This makes it difficult to understand performance in context, learn from peers, or identify which practices lead to positive outcomes, especially for participants facing systemic barriers.

The Workforce Benchmarking Network (WBN) was created to solve this structural problem. Rather than producing another static reporting requirement, the WBN provides organizations with a shared measurement framework to interpret their results relative to similar programs, understand variation in outcomes, and translate data into actionable program improvements, providing helpful information to the workforce organizations and their clients.

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) has been hosting WBN Cohorts in cities including Detroit, Dallas-Fort Worth, Minneapolis-Saint Paul and New York for more than a decade. WBN Cohorts span 12-18 months and bring together 6-16 organizations, selected through a competitive application process, from a specific region or with a shared mission to learn more deeply about their program data and how to use it to improve participant outcomes. Utilizing the WBN National Survey as its backbone, WBN Cohorts blend peer forum workshops with individualized technical assistance to help providers learn about and apply evidence-based practices and continuous improvement processes within their program of focus.

Reimagining Workforce Development at All Star Code: Moving from Youth Programs to a Workforce Strategy

For more than a decade, All Star Code has focused on expanding economic opportunity for young men of color through technical skills, professional networks, and entrepreneurship. Today, that work includes hands-on learning in web development and emerging technologies like AI, alongside opportunities to strengthen transferable skills such as communication, leadership, and collaboration. Since launching in 2013, we have reached more than 10,000 learners, graduated more than 2,100 students from our Summer Intensive, helped more than 450 Scholars secure part-time or full-time employment, and supported the launch of more than 60 Scholar-led startups.

The primary focus of All Star Code's work has been high school students; that is who our programs were built for. Students who complete our Summer Intensive become part of the All Star Code Scholar community, giving "Scholar" a simple meaning in our organization: a young person who has completed our flagship program and can continue to engage with All Star Code opportunities beyond the summer. But these Scholars grow up. By the end of 2024, approximately 800 of the 2,000-plus program participants were workforce-aged, and we kept coming back to the same exciting, slightly

daunting question: what does it look like to support our Scholars not only through a program, but into a career?

Our existing programming was strong and the outcomes were impressive. But the systems supporting the workforce aspect of All Star Code had not kept pace with the people we were serving. If we were serious about careers, we needed to get serious about the infrastructure behind them: a deliberate workforce strategy, better long-term tracking, metrics tied to actual jobs, and a shared, concrete definition of what “job ready” means. That inflection point led us to apply to the Workforce Benchmarking Network (WBN) cohort in New York City.



Members of the 2025 WBN NYC cohort

Photo Credit: Ari Mintz

Participating in the Workforce Benchmarking Network (WBN)

One of the early activities of WBN cohort participation is the “How Might We” activity. Cohort members are led through an exercise to reframe their organizational challenges as “how might we” questions that restate the issue as an invitation for exploration and opportunity.

Instead of focusing on improving one program at a time, the “How Might We” activity led us to consider more deeply the organization we were becoming. The question was no longer, “how do we improve what we already do?” Instead, it became, “what would it take to build a comprehensive workforce development strategy around our Scholars?”

We began moving from delivering programs to intentionally building a talent pipeline. We started seeing ourselves not only as a youth-serving nonprofit, but also as a workforce development organization. And we began thinking more explicitly about the value we create for Scholars, employers, and the broader technology ecosystem.

The activity prompted us to evaluate what we had, what was missing, and where we needed to invest. But before we could build something new, we needed to be honest about where we were starting.

WBN's organizational self-assessment, "Building a Qualified Workforce Among Program Participants," was simultaneously grounding and uncomfortable as we evaluated our processes.

It gave us a structured way to assess areas we knew were important but had not fully built into our systems, including career readiness, workplace skills, coaching and support, employer engagement, and the infrastructure needed to sustain workforce outcomes over time.

The value was not simply identifying what was missing, it was learning to distinguish between surface-level problems and the systems driving them. Various WBN tools, such as the WBN Continuous Improvement Model and Fishbone Diagrams, pushed us to ask not only, "Why did this happen?" but also, "What about our system makes this outcome likely?"

One line from Jessica Carr, Senior Policy Associate with CSW's Improving Practices and Outcomes Team, kept coming back to us: "Don't do more. Do different." For an organization accustomed to meeting challenges by adding a new initiative or refining an existing one, that was an important reset. Sometimes you need another resource. Other times, you need to change the structure underneath the work. That reframing brought us to a more basic issue: if we were preparing Scholars for careers, what exactly did we mean by "job ready"?

Building a Qualified Workforce Among Program Participants Self-Assessment

One of four self-assessments used in WBN Cohorts that is rooted in The Success Drivers, a nationally-recognized framework of evidence-based guidelines developed through interviews with organizations who are part of the WBN and high performers amongst peers.

The Qualified Workforce self-assessment is designed to help cohort members reflect upon and strengthen their program recruitment, coaching and job training practices, exploration, and primes organizations to begin to utilize the WBN's core continuous improvement process.

Redefining Job Readiness

Before participating in the WBN, we used the term "job readiness," but we had not formally defined it or established a way to measure it. When examined more closely, we realized how much was packed into those two words. Job ready for what role? Does readiness look different for cybersecurity than it does for software development? Which skills are technical and role-specific, and which ones carry across occupations? How do employers define readiness, and how can we tell whether our programming is developing the skills they need?

The WBN introduced us to structured approaches that helped us arrive at an important distinction: job readiness is role-specific when viewed through a technical lens, but much more universal when viewed through a career readiness lens. That distinction became the foundation for our own framework.

We examined O*NET Bright Outlook occupations, analyzed the roles our Scholars most frequently enter, held Scholar focus groups, and pressure-tested our thinking against employer expectations. The result was a framework identifying 103 workforce skills across 13 technology occupations.

For All Star Code, this was a meaningful shift. Employability stopped being a collection of generic skills and became something we could connect to actual occupations and labor market demand. The framework also gives us a foundation for assessment. Over time, we can begin measuring whether Scholars are developing the technical and career readiness skills that matter for the careers they are pursuing.

“How Might We” Activity

Cohort members complete problem tree analysis and how might we activity prior to entering into WBN Cohorts.

The problem tree analysis invites cohort members to explore the primary challenge they will be investigating through cohort participation and helps to discern causes from symptoms and to better frame their problem statements.

Framing their challenge as a how might we question helps to restate a challenge as an invitation for exploration, and primes organizations to begin to utilize the WBN’s core continuous improvement process.

From Frameworks to Systems

Employer engagement was one place where All Star Code determined to put this thinking into practice. With WBN’s support, we adapted the Jewish Vocational Service-San Francisco employer engagement framework to think about employer relationships as a progression: from initial engagement, to deeper partnership, to hiring, and ultimately to long-term investment. Rather than treating each employer connection as a standalone opportunity, we began thinking about how relationships could develop into sustained pipelines for Scholars.

Simultaneously, we focused on the infrastructure needed to support that approach and track Scholar outcomes over time. Our work with JPMorgan Chase through Force for Good, its pro bono technology program that pairs nonprofits with technology professionals to tackle organizational challenges, is one example. Through that engagement, we explored building a Scholar Portal that would create a more connected experience for Scholars while improving how we track learning, career engagement, and workforce outcomes.

Because the WBN pushed us to get clear on our priorities before jumping into solutions, we entered the Force for Good engagement with a much better understanding of the problems we were actually trying to solve. Ultimately, the Portal did not reach a level of development or usability that made sense for All Star Code to adopt it as a long-term solution. While the concept addressed needs we had identified, the product itself required more development than we were in a position to sustain.

That experience reinforced something WBN consistently encouraged: test your assumptions, learn

quickly, and be willing to change course when the evidence points somewhere else. It also gave us an opportunity to put three of our organizational pillars into practice: Celebrating Failure, Daring Greatly, and Telling Your Story. We were willing to try something new, acknowledge when it was not working, and be transparent about what we learned.

Instead, we are increasingly interested in using HubSpot as infrastructure rather than simply a platform: a foundation for recruitment, Scholar engagement, career readiness, employer relationships, and long-term workforce tracking. It also brings us closer to something we have long wanted: the ability to conduct longitudinal analysis of our Scholars' experiences and outcomes. The more robust our infrastructure becomes, the better positioned All Star Code is to turn that information into evidence we can use to improve our work, and demonstrate its value.

Building Trust Through Better Infrastructure

These changes have also affected how we communicate about our work externally. There is a difference between telling a funder or partner that workforce development is a priority and actually being able to show them how that priority is reflected in our strategy, systems, and measurement.

WBN has become a credibility signal in those conversations. We can point to national workforce development practices, benchmarking, continuous improvement, and evidence-based frameworks as part of the foundation for our approach. That matters because workforce development runs on trust. A consultant working with us once shared an idea echoing Stephen Covey's well-known principle, that change moves at the speed of trust. Our experience with the WBN made this idea feel practical rather than abstract. When people have shared language, confidence in the framework, and trust in the decision-making process, organizations can move faster. The WBN did not directly create fundraising wins or partnership deals for All Star Code. What it did was strengthen the strategy and infrastructure behind our work, which has made us better equipped to communicate our workforce approach and the direction of the organization. This has supported momentum with partners including the IMA Foundation, Hispanic Federation, People First/OpenAI, and the broader tech ecosystem.

The connection is not one-to-one; it is cumulative. A stronger strategy helps us build better systems. Better systems give us better data. Better data strengthens our storytelling. And clearer storytelling helps partners understand not only what we do, but where we are going.

The Power of the Network

Some of the most valuable aspects of participating in the WBN cannot be captured in a framework or dashboard. The cohort gave us the opportunity to have candid conversations with organizations facing many of the same questions we were: how to define workforce outcomes, engage employers

Four-Phase Spectrum of Employer Engagement

Widely-recognized framework for codifying and deepening partnerships between workforce service providers and their employer partners. continuous improvement process.

meaningfully, build sustainable infrastructure, and move from good intentions to measurable systems.

Our cohort facilitators created a space that balanced practical tools with strategic thinking. There was room to learn, but also room to question our assumptions and acknowledge when something was not working. That kind of peer environment matters when an organization is going through change. Hearing another leader say, “We are struggling with this too,” and then working together to think through possible solutions can be more valuable than reading about the same challenge in a report.

My involvement with WBN has also continued beyond the cohort. Serving on the WBN NYC Advisory Council has given me the opportunity to learn from workforce leaders, represent All Star Code’s perspective, and help shape future cohorts. We came to WBN to learn, and we have increasingly had opportunities to contribute as well.



Author Pryanka Bawa and fellow WBN NYC cohort members working through an activity at a WBN meeting
Photo Credit: Ari Mintz

What Comes Next

The WBN did not hand us a finished workforce development model tied up with a bow. What it gave us was more useful: a structure for continuing to build. Today, All Star Code is investing more deliberately in workforce development infrastructure, including a dedicated Director of Workforce and Programs role. We are strengthening our data systems and employer pipelines while building workflows and automations to help us track Scholar engagement, alumni follow-up, employer relationships, and long-term workforce milestones.

The WBN gave us the tools to ask better questions. Which experiences best predict employment outcomes? Which employer partnerships lead to the strongest hiring pipelines? What drives Scholar retention? Which technical, professional, or engagement milestones are most closely associated with long-term career success?

We cannot answer those questions yet. But we now have a clearer understanding of what we need to measure, how our systems need to be structured, and how we can use what we learn to improve our work.

That might be WBN's biggest impact on All Star Code. It did not just give us tools. It changed the way we think about workforce development. We entered the WBN knowing that our Scholars were moving into the workforce and that our organization needed to grow alongside them. We came out with a clearer strategy, stronger systems, a more practical definition of job readiness, and a community of peers who continue to challenge our thinking. The work is far from finished. In many ways, we are only beginning to build the infrastructure our Scholars will rely on as their careers unfold. But we are no longer guessing about direction. We have a better sense of what we are building, why it matters, and how we will know whether it is working.

Conclusion

WBN Cohorts are conducted both virtually and in-person to organizations serving a specific population, industry, or region at a fee or through philanthropic funding. If you are a workforce service provider, funder, or intermediary interested in joining an existing cohort or realizing a new cohort, please contact Alex Breen, at abreen@skilledwork.org to learn more about upcoming offerings.

The new WBN National Survey platform remains available to all workforce service providers at no cost through generous funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. If you are a workforce service provider, funder, or intermediary interested in accessing the new platform, you can [learn more about participating in the WBN National Survey here](#).

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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 success. We offer a variety of services across our five strategy areas:

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