



“Our Success Is Our Graduates”

Case Study of Year Up: A Career Advancement Model for Low-Income Young Adults

By Radha Roy Biswas

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About the Author

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Jobs for the Future seeks to accelerate the educational and economic advancement of youth and adults struggling in today's economy. JFF partners with leaders in education, business, government, and communities around the nation to: strengthen opportunities for youth to succeed in postsecondary learning and high-skill careers; increase opportunities for low-income individuals to move into family-supporting careers; and meet the growing economic demand for knowledgeable and skilled workers.

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“Our Success Is Our Graduates”

Overview

Year Up, an innovative technology training program, prepares and places low-income, urban young adults in entry-level IT jobs while also preparing them for college. The program targets recent high school graduates and GED recipients between the ages of 18 and 24 who are either unemployed or trapped in dead-end jobs. It provides them with an intensive year of technical, professional, and business communications training. It also provides an internship experience, college credit, and a high degree of personal and academic support. The program serves over 200 students per year in Boston, Cambridge, and Providence. A Washington, DC, site will enroll its first class in early 2006, raising the number of students served annually to 300.

Since its founding in 2000, Year Up has produced outstanding results for its students. Despite the sharp downturn in the information technology job market, the program has secured six-month internships for its students in desktop support and Web production positions. In addition, the program has placed 87 percent of its graduates in jobs at an average pay of \$14.71 an hour.

Roughly 44 percent of Year Up graduates currently attend college (most while working). The program expects that number to grow as graduates gain access to tuition reimbursement benefits and become more established in their careers. About 83 percent of Year Up students successfully complete the demanding one-year program.

Year Up’s corporate customers, which include large financial services companies, technology firms, hospitals, and state government, pay the program a fee of \$685 to \$785 a week per intern. The internships thus provide Year Up with a funding stream that covers more than 45 percent of operating expenses.

Several features of Year Up appear to account for its success.

First, students receive technical training that is customized to the needs of Year Up’s corporate customers, along with professional skills emphasized by all employers. Program staff work closely with these clients to stay current with their latest IT needs and adjust the training accordingly. In addition to technical skills, the training curriculum places a strong emphasis on professional (“soft”) skills, which include personal and project management, teamwork, conflict resolution, business writing and communication, email, and learning-to-learn.

During the first six months, students receive intensive, full-time training on both technical and professional skills, and they are paid a \$6 an hour stipend tied to a signed contract. The contract is a behavioral tool that reinforces their contractual obligation to come to class on time and perform at a high professional level at all times. The contract is also integrated with a feedback process that teaches students how to effectively give and receive feedback in the workplace.

The six-month training is in preparation for Year Up’s most critical feature: the six-month paid internship. This experience makes Year Up graduates competitive in the job market despite their lack of a college degree or professional work experience. The program places interns in more than 40 leading companies, such as State Street Corporation, Partners HealthCare, CVS/pharmacy, and Putnam Investments. The fact that Year Up charges employers for its interns serves as an important quality control: employers will only pay the fees if they receive candidates who can perform well. Interns are supported by a supervisor throughout the experience and return to Year Up weekly for support throughout the internship.





Year Up provides students with numerous resources to support their transitions to careers and higher education. All staff members act as advisors, meeting with students weekly to advise them on professional and personal issues. In addition, each student is assigned a mentor from the business community to further support their professional development. Tutors offer additional support.

Year Up students earn up to 18 college credits through the program. The Year Up curriculum and its instructors are approved for college credit at Cambridge College, a private, four-year college whose mission is to help working adults continue their education by building on a lifetime of learning. Year Up students are considered to be dually enrolled and receive credits from Cambridge College for the classes they take at Year Up, including the internship.

Entry Requirements

A high school diploma or a GED is required to participate in Year Up. The program seeks applicants who have an interest in technology, along with indications that, with support, they will be motivated enough to apply themselves to the intensive training and a challenging internship. Year Up also looks for young adults who do not have a clear pathway to well-paying careers and higher education, based on their employment and academic history.

Successful applicants complete an application and an assessment at Year Up, which includes a written assessment and interview. As part of the assessment, applicants write an essay, complete reading comprehension and brief technical tests, and participate in group interviews. If there is not a clear "yes" or "no" on whether to admit an applicant, he or she may be invited in for a second interview. The primary objectives of the assessment are to gauge: interest in the program and motivation; writing and reading ability; attitude; and ability to follow directions. Technical ability is not a requirement; in fact, a student with strong technical skills and no substantial risk factors would typically be disqualified. High school academic performance is also not critical to acceptance; the GPA of accepted students

has averaged roughly 2.0. Year Up looks at the applicant as a whole, with the goal of identifying candidates with significant needs and risk factors that the program can—in most cases—remediate in six months to a level where the students can perform at an acceptable level in entry-level professional positions.

Training Curriculum

During their first six months, Year Up students attend classes at one of three sites in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. A one-week orientation and five-week core curriculum covers Microsoft Office and provides a general introduction to computers. The technical training then focuses on desktop user support/IT help desk skills, including hardware and software troubleshooting and repair, network support, hardware and software installation, system administration, operating systems, customer services skills, etc. This prepares students for entry-level positions as desktop, network, and help desk support specialists.

Concurrently with the technical training, the students learn professional skills that prepare them to succeed in the business world. These skills include:

- *Personal Management:* Time management, financial management, networking, interviewing;
- *Workplace Norms:* Introduction to business, assertiveness, professional culture and etiquette, meeting survival, legal issues; and
- *Working in Teams:* Project management, conflict resolution, teamwork, managing your boss.

In addition, a business communications curriculum focuses on listening skills, reading comprehension, and written and oral communication (including email and presentations).

Year Up continually reviews and updates its curriculum structure. The curriculum is organized in a modular fashion: all participants go through professional, business writing, and basic computer skills training, followed by specializations in help desk/desktop support or financial transaction processing. This allows Year Up to react quickly to market needs and ensure that students develop skills relevant to internships and jobs that are in demand.

Year Up students in Boston and Cambridge and Metro Washington, DC, are dually enrolled at Cambridge College and can earn up to 18 college credits. Each student is assessed throughout the first six months using both Cambridge College's grading system and Year Up's technical and professional skill assessment. During the internships that follow, intern supervisors complete three surveys that evaluate each student on technical and professional skills.

Paid Corporate Internship

After they complete six months of technical and professional training, Year Up places students in six-month, paid internships with one of forty leading companies, such as Children's Hospital, Bain and Company, Partners HealthCare, and Fidelity Investments. These companies pay Year Up \$685 to \$785 a week for their interns.

The internship is the most critical part of the program. Year Up operates on the premise that students from the population it serves are often held back from well-paying jobs, not for want of talent or commitment, but because they lack access to the marketplace and job networks. And even after they step in through the door, they often lack the professional skills to adapt to a workplace culture. Year Up's internship addresses just those needs. It provides young adults with the access they lack, exposes them to workplace cultures, and allows them to apply their skills, gain demonstrable experience, and broaden their industry contacts and references. Gaining demonstrable skills is particularly important in the IT field, where employers often hire for skills over credentials. And the fact that employers pay Year Up close to market rates (i.e., what they would pay for a contract worker with equivalent skills) for its interns serves as an important quality control measure: employers will only pay these fees if they receive interns who can perform well.

Internships provide students with an additional benefit: a path to financing higher education. Once a student makes it through the company door, they find that many internships turn into jobs, and employer-initiated programs can help them continue their education while earning an income.

Support Services

In addition to core training and paid internships, Year Up provides its students with numerous resources to support their transitions to careers and higher education. All staff members act as student advisors, meeting with students weekly to advise them on professional and personal issues. Each student signs a contract that reinforces proper professional behavior. Year Up staff members receive professional training in case management and resource building. Each student is also assigned a mentor from the business community to further support his or her professional development. Weekly guest presenters offer career and life perspectives and often act as part of the students' professional network. Field trips to real workplaces increase the students' awareness of business settings and opportunities. Volunteer social workers and tutors offer additional support.

Further, because the young adults that Year Up serves do not have professional networks upon which to draw, the program explicitly addresses their need to create social networks, both during and after the program. While in the program, the students take courses in professional networking and have opportunities to meet many successful professionals through the external mentors and weekly guest speakers. When students graduate from Year Up, they become members of the Alumni Association. Each year, several graduates are elected to leadership positions on the Alumni Association Board (president, vice president, treasurer, and at-large officers), and the board is allocated a budget to serve to needs of Year Up's growing alumni. The ultimate goal is to create a community of professionals that provides deep and lasting support for future graduates as they begin to establish their careers.

Description of Participating Employees and Employers

Employees/Participants

Year Up's target population consists of at-risk, educationally disadvantaged, low-income, urban young adults, ages 18 to 24. Participants must have a high school diploma or a GED. Year Up actively recruits students from high schools that have a higher percentage of low-income students and a lower percentage of graduates who go directly to college. Recruitment and enrollment are conducted in partnership with a wide variety of alternative education and skills-training programs serving young people in the Boston area. Referrals from Year Up alumni are an increasingly important channel for recruitment.

Demographics

Based on the first five Year Up classes, two-thirds (66 percent) of all participants have been men of color; 94 percent of male participants have been of color (see table). Their average personal income at the time they enter the program is about \$9,900. Most students live on their own; those who live with family members typically must pay their share of the bills and struggle to make ends meet.

For many of these young people, there is no family history of college enrollment, let alone completion, and for both academic and financial reasons, students often lack confidence in their ability to succeed at the college level. Many face considerable challenges, such as economic pressures, skill deficiencies, language barriers, and domestic problems. Year Up's assessment of its students identifies obstacles to success based on the observations of staff and information from caseworkers and counselors prior to entering the program.

Once students begin Year Up, the program keeps track of 11 possible risk factors that its students may face, so it can better address problems that arise. The most common of these risk factors is a family situation or environment that significantly impedes the student's ability to learn or work at a high level. That factor has been found to affect 32 percent of Year Up students from the first five years in the program. In addition, 29 percent of the students have been non-native

English speakers, and about 20 percent have faced temporary homelessness. Smaller percentages of students fall in other categories, which include involvement with the court system (a Year Up student may be on probation), being a parent or caring for an elder or sick relative, and having a learning disability or physical or mental health challenge that affects the ability to learn or work.

Employers

Year Up's employer partners, numbering more than 40, represent a variety of sectors of the economy: education/nonprofit/government; financial services; media and technology; professional services; retail and manufacturing; and health care and biotech. Year Up

Characteristics of Year Up Participants, 2000-2005

	NUMBER	PERCENT
Sex		
Male	135	69%
Female	61	31%
Ethnicity		
African-American	85	43%
Hispanic/Latino	50	26%
Southeast Asian	19	10%
West Indian/Caribbean	17	9%
Caucasian	12	6%
Other	13	6%
Age		
18-19	93	47%
20-21	63	32%
22-24	40	21%
Language/Other		
Native English Speaking	140	71%
English as a Second Language	56	29%
Single Parent	30	15%
Area		
Boston	130	66%
Surrounding Towns	66	34%

Source: Year Up

works consistently with its employer base to understand what jobs are in demand in these sectors and what skills are required for those jobs.

Year Up also regularly assesses the local labor market to determine where the next internships and job placements can come from. As a result of its labor market assessments, it is now planning to target entry-level financial services positions—primarily back-office jobs—and plans to research positions in hospital administration and support.

Employers not only sign up for paid internships, which finance about 45 percent of Year Up's operating costs; they bring other resources to the table as well. Year Up has more than 200 active employer volunteers and a solid donor base that support the program in different ways. Many companies, such as State Street Corporation and Putnam Investments, provide internships, volunteers, grants, advice, and many other forms of support.

Alta Communications, an equity investment firm focused on the media and telecommunications industries, is an example of the considerable corporate support extended to Year Up. The company provided Year Up with office space during incubation, and its managing general partner, Tim Dibble, now chairs Year Up's board of directors. Through Dibble's leadership and demonstrated commitment from the top, a significant number of Alta employees have "adopted" Year Up, acting as mentors, tutors, and donors. This partnership has also opened doors to other partners and donors, who support Year Up in multiple ways, providing internships, mentors, guest speakers, and corporate and individual donations.

Costs and Financing of Program

Year Up's 2005 operating budget is \$5.5 million, including capital to open and grow new sites. The full operating cost per student is roughly \$24,000 a year, with the training stipend comprising about 35 percent of that amount. The remaining 65 percent covers the per-student cost of the classroom training, support services, and tuition for college credit classes. The per-student costs are financed by a diverse fundraising base

of internship revenue; donations from foundations, corporations, and individuals; and public funds, including Pell Grants. Internship revenue averages about \$15,000 per student (excluding attrition), covering a substantial portion of the training cost per student. Private donations cover the remaining expenses.

Fundamental to Year Up's vision is its commitment to developing a financial model that is both sustainable and scalable. Year Up has a four-year goal of covering 70 percent of operating expenses through earned revenue (primarily internships), supplemented by public funding, such as state and federal grants. Year Up expects the remaining 30 percent to come from private sources: primarily individual donations, driven by a scholarship program and targeted foundation and corporate grants. Year Up expects to generate growth capital from similar sources: foundations, major individual gifts, and private placements.

Expansion

Year Up operates sites in Greater Boston and Providence; a Washington, DC, site will begin classes in early 2006. Year Up plans to expand to New York City in the next year, with the goal of serving a total of 450 urban young adults annually by 2007.

In February 2006, Year Up will test a second area of study, covering financial services. Topics will include finance principles and terminology, mutual funds, 401K programs, and customer service skills. The curriculum is being developed in conjunction with Putnam Investments and other financial services firms. This will prepare students for entry-level positions in financial services, such as plan administrator and customer service representative. Year Up is also exploring a health care specialization.

The addition of these programs and further plans for expansion are based on input from employers on their workforce needs and Year Up's assessment of potential placements for students.

Year Up has planned its expansion in distinct phases. Its work in Greater Boston has demonstrated the program model's impact and viability, constituting the "proof of concept" phase. The second phase, which began in 2005, involves limited expansion beyond



Boston to Providence, RI; Metro Washington, DC; and the New York metropolitan area in the next five years. This phase focuses on building the organization's human capital (i.e., staff), developing a sustainable financial model, and documenting intellectual property such as the curriculum and contract. A third phase will seek to employ a franchise model to drive national expansion.

Ultimately, Year Up's goal is to create and implement a replication model that allows it to effectively serve tens of thousands of urban young adults across the country.

Program Results

Since its inception, Year Up has trained and placed 215 young adults in Greater Boston. It is on a steep growth trajectory, currently serving more than 200 students in 2005 in Boston, Cambridge, and Providence. In 2006, it will serve 300 students, including students at the Washington, DC, site.

The program has achieved a high graduation rate: about 83 percent of the students who have enrolled successfully completed Year Up's demanding one-year program.

Despite the sharp downturn in the information technology job market, Year Up has continued to secure six-month internships for its students in entry-level IT positions (e.g., desktop/help desk support), for which companies pay Year Up a fee of \$685 to \$785 a week.

Year Up has placed 87 percent of students who completed the program in full- or part-time work, with an average wage of \$14.71/hour. In contrast, other Latino and African-American high school graduates in Boston who did not attend college but are employed earned an inflation-adjusted wage of \$9.30/hour.

More than 60 percent of Year Up graduates apply to and are accepted by colleges, and 44 percent currently attend college. Year Up expects college graduation rates over the long term to significantly exceed those of their low-income counterparts. Thus far, Year Up has ensured that all students applying for college are accepted by a two or four-year college. Year Up graduates attend a variety of institutions, including Cambridge College, the University of Massachusetts, Northeastern University, and various other state and community colleges. Of the graduates attending college, more than 90 percent have continued year to year. Year Up expects its first graduate to earn a Bachelor's degree in 2006.

Advancement for Low-Wage Workers:

A Series of Reports from Jobs for the Future



Jobs for the Future develops models, strategies, and policies that enable adults to advance toward economic self-sufficiency for themselves and their families. Drawing on innovative workforce development efforts around the country, our publications, tool kits, and other resources respond to the challenges to advancement for low-wage workers. With the series *Advancement for Low-Wage Workers*, JFF seeks to elevate discussion of this critical issue within and outside the workforce field. Elaborating upon the themes in the series introduction, *The Next Challenge*, these occasional papers address public policy and on-the-ground practice.

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Public Views on Low Wage Workers in the Current Economy (2001)

A National Survey of American Attitudes About Low-Wage Workers and Welfare Reform (2000)



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