Reconnecting Opportunity Youth

Steven M. Bennett

2016 Co-Learning Plan Series

Michigan State University
EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
Center for Community and Economic Development
University Center for Regional Economic Innovation

EDA
U.S. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Reconnecting Opportunity Youth

Michigan State University

Center for Community and Economic Development

EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation

Steven M. Bennett

This project is supported in part pursuant to the receipt of financial assistance from the United States Department of Commerce – Economic Development Administration. The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of any federal agency or Michigan State University.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

As the Great Recession reached its nadir in the last quarter of 2008 and first quarter of 2009, economic experts, workforce thought leaders, and political pundits alike braced for a near collapse of the world economic system. This system's strong downturn was based on two primary metrics: a significant decrease in gross domestic product (GDP) and a significant increase in unemployment. The former was a nebulous concept with effects that translated poorly to the average American household. The latter was a very real threat that seemingly touched every American family directly or indirectly. As the national unemployment rate finally began to decrease from its high point of 10 percent in 2009, the nation gave a collective sigh of relief, releasing the pent up tensions and anxiety that helped perpetuate the recession in the first place.

The unemployment rate during the Great Recession, however painful, was in fact misleading for many portions of the population. Various populations within the total workforce experienced the effects of unemployment in very different ways. Highly educated professionals saw unemployment far below the average 10 percent rate; minority population groups saw unemployment rates far above this average. Further, large urban centers saw higher unemployment rates, as did various age groups. The average unemployment rate was startling, but for many in this country, this statistical marker did not accurately reflect the long-term, ongoing unemployment trends many marginalized communities endured even in good economic times.

One such group is the seemingly invisible population known as disconnected youth, those aged 16-24 who are disconnected from education and the mainstream workforce, as defined by numerous policy groups and government bodies across the country. This group, sometimes referred to as "opportunity youth", is disproportionately male, non-white, and, by definition, lack the documented academic, training, and/or knowledge credentials that are necessary to participate in the mainstream workforce.

There exists a myriad of strategies, programs and organizations around the country that are focused on reconnecting disconnected youth with substantive educational and workforce opportunities. Leading scholars, experts, and thought leaders and organizations such as The Aspen Institute, the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) have regularly produced policy and white papers describing the plight of opportunity youth. This research is based on ever-increasing amounts of data that help frame the enormity of the challenge at hand. Traditional players within the K-12, workforce, post-secondary, and community-based organization arenas are justifiably paying significant attention to these complicated issues. Accordingly, this paper seeks to highlight one dimension of reconnection; the intersection of opportunity youth with direct employment opportunities and sourcing strategies. The purpose of this paper therefore is to better understand how opportunity youth can participate in the mainstream workforce and begin the process of reconnection leading to economic security.

The framework posited within this paper, admittedly, doesn't add substantially to the current literature on the engagement of opportunity youth; instead it organizes a set of concepts about how opportunity youth can better position themselves for jobs, how community based organizations and training providers can catalyze reconnection, and how employers can better understand the skills and competencies that many opportunity youth bring to the table. This paper doesn't provide a single solution to reconnect opportunity youth to educational and employment opportunities, as no single solution exists. Further, this paper doesn't provide empirical evidence about the framework's viability or efficacy. Instead, the paper's framework is based on a set of solutions designed to help reduce bias and increase the evidence by which employers can make accurate hiring decisions. These "demand-driven" and "competency-based" solutions borrow from strategies that have been used for other parts of the American workforce, and the combination of these efforts can help opportunity youth overcome many of the barriers they face in an increasingly competitive atmosphere for jobs.

Accordingly, this paper supports the premise that reconnection for opportunity youth is not only imperative, but also entirely feasible when motivated partners converge their resources and available opportunities in an organized and efficient manner.

DEFINITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

As with most policy issues, the discussion around opportunity youth employs its own definitions and terminology, some of which requires some further exploration and grounding. For the purposes of this framework, the following terms and definitions will be used to best describe opportunity youth and the framework for reconnection to employment and education opportunities.

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AND DISCONNECTED YOUTH

These terms are used interchangeably throughout this framework. As such, they are defined as youth aged 16-24 who have no documented secondary or post-secondary credential, are not currently enrolled in school, and do not have mainstream employment. The terms are used interchangeably based on the appropriate syntax of each section.

It is important to note that the traditional term for this population has long been disconnected youth and that the term opportunity youth is relatively new, adopted to position these young persons in a more positive light. This delineation will be described further in this section, but the use of both terms is not meant to assign value to one term over the other; instead, rules for the flow of writing and ease of reading make the use of both terms necessary.

MAINSTREAM WORKFORCE/EMPLOYMENT

Throughout this framework, the term “mainstream” is used to describe both the workforce and employment status of opportunity youth. This term refers to formal employment where individuals and employers pay taxes, document eligibility for work, and follow standard working protocols as prescribed by local, state, and federal statute. The delineation for mainstream employment is important as many individuals within the opportunity youth population work in the so-called underground economy, where employment is informal, taxes aren’t paid, and traditional rules of work are not monitored or regulated. It is important to understand that many opportunity youth do in fact have work histories where skills have been developed, even if it is difficult or impossible to document such employment and competencies developed, thereby.

DESIRE-CENTERED RESEARCH VS. DAMAGE-CENTERED RESEARCH

In 2009, scholar Eve Tuck published an important article that frames much of the content within this paper. In her article, entitled “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities”, she calls on scholars and thought leaders to move from damage-centered research to desire-centered research. Her challenge is based on a near-invisible trend where research that focuses on underserved, underrepresented, and/or marginalized populations is framed from a deficit perspective. In fact, even the terms “underserved” and “underrepresented” can have damage-centered connotations. Tuck (2009) succinctly describes the phenomenon of damage-centered research:

> “…It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community.”

In contrast, desire-centered research is cognizant of the harsh realities present in these communities, but also focuses on the aspirations and opportunities of those that are the focus of the research. According to

Tuck (2009):

> "…Desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives. Such an axiology is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that – so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression."

Based on Tuck's transformational positioning of damage-centered and desire-centered research, this paper will position opportunity youth as part of a desire-centered framework for reconnection. This kind of approach, which helps explain the emergence of the term "opportunity youth", will deeply inform the recommendations and next steps that are part of this paper.

SETTING THE STAGE

To better understand the relevance of the various players within this framework, and recognize that reconnection for opportunity youth is in fact possible, it is important to understand the basic descriptors of opportunity youth, what kind of jobs are possible within this framework, and who the ideal supporting partners are within a community.

Further, in addition to this basic background information, this section will also provide an overview of a collaborative effort known as Collective Impact, which can serve the intersection of opportunity youth and their goals, while informing the creation of the framework for reconnection.

UNDERSTANDING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

Much has been written about the plight of opportunity youth, from multiple perspectives. A review of the literature reveals a prominent focus on the economic conditions surrounding opportunity youth, both in terms of individual impact and community/social impact. In addition, significant research exists that describes the circumstances that lead to disconnection, including the multiple dimensions that can catalyze and/or sustain disconnection over the long term.

In a previous work, Katie Hall and I wrote about the dimensions that often lead to disconnection. These dimensions are numerous, and deserve some attention in this framework in order to understand the circumstances that opportunity youth have to endure. In that paper, we developed a comprehensive list of disconnection dimensions culled from an equally comprehensive literature review. The paper identified over two dozen different dimensions of disconnection, defined as items that often lead to youth dropping out of school and subsequently becoming unable to obtain and retain mainstream employment. In alphabetical order, some of these dimensions are listed here:

- Aging out of foster care
- Dropping out of school
- Contact with juvenile justice system
- History of physical and/or mental abuse
- Incarceration
- Lack of completion in a traditional school setting
- Lacking access to postsecondary education
- Lacking career guidance
- Lacking career navigation skills
- Lacking job seeking skills

- Lacking leadership skills
- Lacking networks for job search
- Lacking positive adult mentors/role models
- Lacking positive peer support/interaction
- Lacking skills for labor market navigation
- Lacking transportation for jobs
- Lacking work experience
- Lacking work readiness skills
- Living in broken families
- Living in distressed neighborhoods
- Living in foster care
- Living in poverty
- Living in rural areas
- Recent release from incarceration

Admittedly, many of these dimensions are framed from the damage-centered perspective, but they are important parts of a complicated puzzle in understanding the holistic challenges that lead to disconnection. Because disconnection is a negative state, there are undoubtedly damage-based components that describe why disconnection occurs. This framework will focus on solutions that are desire-based, despite the damage-based components that comprise much of the 24 dimensions listed.

The data that describes the profile of opportunity youth is overwhelming. Two important papers (Belfield et al, 2012, and Wight et al, 2010), among many others, succinctly describe the demographic profile of America's opportunity youth population. Key data points include the following:

- 5.8 million young adults, ages 16-24 are considered disconnected, with 53% male and 47% female (in contrast, 33.9 million young adults are considered connected, which means that nearly 15% of this population group is disconnected).
- 40% of disconnected youth reside in poor households.
- 31% of disconnected youth have dropped out of school.
- 13% of disconnected youth have a documented disability.
- Of all disconnected youth, nearly 43% are unemployed (counted as part of the total workforce) and over 57% are not in the labor force at all.
- 88.5% of disconnected youth belong to racial/ethnic minority groups.
- Of disconnected youth living alone, only 6.4% are at or above 300% of the federal poverty line and a full 63% are at or below the federal poverty line.

Alone, any of these statistics is startling. Combined, they describe an overwhelming endemic that has hindered the futures of too many youth in this country.

Beyond the demographic descriptors that paint a bleak picture, there are significant economic factors that impact individuals, communities, and our entire society alike. Belfield, et al, (2012) describe the economic impact of opportunity youth in a popular report that has positioned disconnection as having significant economic consequences. While this conclusion seems obvious, their work provides a tangible construct for the financial liabilities that exist in tandem with disconnection. Their research defines two types of economic burdens: that of the taxpayer and the overall social burden.

The taxpayer burden includes well-known problems like lost or deficient tax revenues, public expenses related to criminal activity and healthcare, and basic social safety net programs (welfare). The social burden is calculated based on indirect and non-governmental expenses and liabilities that occur as a result of disconnection, including lost earnings, victim expenses from criminal activity, private or written-off healthcare expenses, and productivity losses because of a less-educated workforce.

The calculations based on these economic burdens reveal staggering liabilities. In terms of the taxpayer, the annual burden for a single disconnected youth between the ages of 16-24 is $13,900 annually; this leads to a lifetime total of more than $258,000. The social burden is even greater. Annual burdens for individuals aged 16-24 equal more than $37,000 each year; the lifetime burden equals nearly $756,000 on the social infrastructure (Belfield et al, 2012).

Taking this a step further, the research of Wight, et al, (2010) reveals that there were 620,407 disconnected youth in 2010. If each of these individuals remained disconnected throughout their life, the total taxpayer burden is more than $160 billion; the total social burden is nearly $470 billion over their lifetime. The fact that research suggests that individuals who aren't reconnected by the time they are 25 are more likely to remain disconnected for all of their working life means both the taxpayer system and social infrastructure will likely experience this kind of burden for just this single cohort of individuals.

It is easy to generalize the problem of disconnection by associating it with big numbers and/or common social attributes. In doing so, we become disconnected ourselves from the real-life stories of those struggling with disconnection. An antidote to this kind of apathy is found in the groundbreaking research of Columbia University professor Sudhir Venkatesh, a sociologist who spent years immersed in the lives of disconnected youth and families in the housing projects of Chicago. In addition to being able to illustrate poverty beyond the numbers and generic descriptions, Venkatesh (2006) also provides a portrait of how disconnection leads to entrepreneurship outside of the mainstream workforce and economy. For instance, where households and neighborhoods lack mainstream jobs, access to financial institutions, and traditional public agencies, they make up for this void with barter systems, entrepreneurial efforts, and informal social structures that provide physical security, mentorship, and quasi bureaucracies to organize communal endeavors. His work is an important component of this paper as it originates largely from desire-centered research.

The overall picture of opportunity youth can't be accurately described in any written narrative, academic or otherwise. At the end of the day, individuals who are described as opportunity youth have unique attributes and conditions that may or may not align with these macro descriptions. Nevertheless, it's important to understand some key conclusions about these conditions that can further the connectivity between opportunity youth and employers:

- Individuals have a clear need for mainstream employment opportunities.
- Those deemed opportunity youth, from a macro perspective, have had limited success with mainstream functions within the world of work and education, and thus require positive experiences to help prevent permanent disconnection.
- The skills and attributes of opportunity youth should be understood by employers vis a vis non-mainstream institutions that require critical thinking and other foundational employment skills, as referenced in Venkatesh's work (2006).

RELEVANT EMPLOYERS FOR RECONNECTION

Employers of all sorts ought to be interested in providing opportunities for those that are disconnected, as the country is experiencing record job openings in nearly all sectors. For instance, as of the beginning of this year, health care had more than 1 million open positions across the country (BLS citation). To fill those open positions, employers can either poach employees from their competitors, thereby driving up wages speculatively, or develop more refined and inclusive practices to source talent from entire workforce population.

Though many employment positions cannot be easily filled by those deemed disconnected, because of the absence of significant training and skill development, there are other employment opportunities that require the skills, competencies, and work ethic that any individual, regardless of workforce connection, can possess. Careers in retail, healthcare, manufacturing, agriculture, and many other sectors are ripe for those with no or few documented skills and competencies. While these sectors include significant numbers of positions with wages that aren't family sustaining (based off of significant analysis and research conducted by United Way's ALICE Project), they can be considered entry points on a career pathway that leads to sustained employment. This framework is designed to help better illustrate how the uptake of these individuals into the workforce can occur.

As with any form of innovation, early adopters from the employers' side are needed to take the proverbial "leap of faith" that is required. While this framework utilizes an evidence-based methodology, employers are cautious of making mistakes in acquiring and advancing talent. Thus, early adopters must be identified and encouraged so as to bring this kind of work to scale.

Community-Based Organizations for Reconnection

Any form of workforce development, regardless of workforce connectivity, requires the partnership of numerous and varied community-based organizations (CBOs). For the purposes of this framework, they can be described as workforce development organizations, training providers, and human service agencies, or collectively as CBOs.

Workforce development organizations include the traditional workforce boards found in every region across the country, with funding by the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) and occasionally by state labor agencies as well. Other workforce development agencies exist, but at a minimum workforce development organizations must be a collaborative partner in this kind of work.

Training providers include secondary institutions (high schools, public or otherwise), career and technical education centers (CTE), adult education centers, and community colleges. There are other training providers that can also be incorporated in this work, including for-profit and proprietary organizations. Training providers that are engaged should be accredited and able to provide recognized, portable, and stackable credentials to individuals.

Human service agencies are those that provide the wraparound supports for individuals as they seek to reconnect. The list of organizations is long and inclusive, and each community will have particular agencies that integrate better into this framework than others. In short, faith-based organizations, human service agencies, and agencies that help mitigate the barriers described above are best suited for this work.

The Role of Collective Impact

There are many programs, strategies, and tools that have been designed to support the collaborative efforts of disparate partners who come together to achieve a common goal. One such program, which has been written about extensively by the Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR), is called Collective Impact.

The approach is designed to integrate the efforts of numerous and varied partners who seek to work together in the pursuit of a common agenda. While this seems relatively simple, these kinds of efforts within the education, non-profit, and community based organization (CBO) arena have often been derailed by limited resources, competing or contradictory goals, and unclear metrics by which to measure success. Collective Impact seeks to mitigate those common issues with a set of components that any group of partners ought to implement when undertaking systemic or seismic change.

The Collective Impact approach, as compared to other collaborative approaches, provides a level of organization and discipline that is necessary when numerous partners come together to work on a social issue. SSIR's comparison of different types of collaborations describes the varying shortcomings of common collaborative efforts, as compared to Collective Impact.

Implementation and execution of the Collective Impact methodology includes five different components that need to be agreed to and shared by all partners. The five components, as described by SSIR, include the following:

- *A common agenda* – all partners have a shared, common agenda for success. Differences among partners are discussed and negotiated early on so that all stakeholders have clarity about the shared work.
- *Shared measurement systems* – partners agree on the manner in which success is measured, including specific metrics. According to SSIR, shared measurement systems also help ensure accountability among all stakeholders.
- *Mutually reinforcing activities* – a shared and common agenda means partners perform work that they are specifically expert at, without replication or duplication of efforts. The group of partners within a Collective Impact approach should complement one another's skills in order to complete the defined processes effectively.
- *Continuous communication* – partners develop trust when there are open, free flowing, and transparent forms of communication. Communication, broadly defined, means partners understand the roles of one another, progress and performance, and challenges that occur, in a timely and respectful manner.
- *Backbone support organization* – all Collective Impact approaches require a neutral backbone support organization that manages the efforts of all partners, without influencing the common agenda. This coordination role helps develop trust and accountability in a more efficient manner.

Understanding these components, communities can utilize the Collective Impact methodology to effectively work together in support of opportunity youth. As the challenges and aspirations surrounding opportunity youth are vast and complex, it's important that communities utilize a methodology like this to ensure efficiency and cooperation from key stakeholders. For employers who don't normally work with CBOs or public entities in this fashion, the CI approach can help ensure that their engagement in reconnection activities is effective.

THE FRAMEWORK

With a basic understanding of the players at hand, a framework for reconnection can be positioned as a logical, reasonable, and viable solution to aid disconnected youth.

To understand the framework, the "status quo" is first presented, to describe how youth reconnection currently occurs. This is not an indictment of any group or agency and certainly those reading this framework will find exception with some of the generalizations contained within. Admittedly, there are numerous exceptions to these generalizations. The point of this framework is to provide a set of strategies and solutions that can be implemented for large scale change. In other words, this kind of framework can become the new status quo. Programs that are working around the country have merit, without question. But an analysis of existing programs reveals that large scale systems and solutions have not yet been implemented or integrated in any substantive way. The recommendation for a framework for reconnection seeks to change that.

THE STATUS QUO

In general, opportunity youth move from organization to organization to receive various services that are aimed to help them reconnect to the mainstream economy. Community based organizations, K-12 institutions, postsecondary institutions, workforce agencies, and numerous other organizations provide a plethora of services to opportunity youth. Supportive services that help with transportation, childcare, and other expenses related to education and work are essential. Case management and one-on-one advising/guidance that many of these organizations provide helps develop trust for opportunity youth who often times do not trust mainstream systems. Further, training programs that are adapted to meet the needs of non-traditional learners are an important part of the equation, helping ensure opportunity youth can in fact re-engage. There is not, however, a large scale strategy or infrastructure to systemically connect these services so that opportunity youth don't fall through the cracks.

If an opportunity youth is struggling with work in the classroom, there are no structured systems in place to ensure that case managers or advisors can intervene early on. If transportation becomes an issue, there's no organized fashion by which training providers can work with the student on alternative training options. There are numerous ways to describe the potential disconnection among service and training providers, but the key takeaway in understanding the status quo infrastructure is that these myriad systems don't have a sustained method for connecting with one another in support of opportunity youth.

Further, and equally as important, there is a lack of defined competencies and skills that individuals ought to be aiming for in order to achieve economic security. Following the path of traditional liberal arts based curricula, regardless of developmental education requirements, can create barriers and valleys between disconnected youth and the jobs they intend to obtain during their professional career. How particular skills and competencies connect to specific jobs and careers remains a mystery for many that are deemed opportunity youth. Connecting the needs of employers (in a demand-driven manner) with evidence-based strategies (using competencies as the anchoring tool) is a missing component, by and large, for reconnecting opportunity youth.

As stated previously, there are anecdotal examples that any reader can think of that counter this critique of the status quo. But there is no formal system yet that has been sustained in a large-scale manner. There are many reasons for this. First and foremost, this kind of work requires long-term infrastructure that necessitates consistent funding, staffing, and visibility within the community. Secondly, the types of organizations can vary from region to region; the role of a workforce agency in one state may look very different in another. And thirdly, this kind of framework requires a comprehensive connection with employers. These are large obstacles to overcome.

A FRAMEWORK FOR RECONNECTION

To improve the status quo in a substantive manner, opportunity youth need a comprehensive, consistent, and sustained community infrastructure that possesses three components: firstly, this infrastructure must be easily accessible to opportunity youth in a manner that supports their progression; secondly, this infrastructure must mitigate, directly or indirectly, the factors that lead to disconnection in the first place, as described previously; and thirdly, this infrastructure must clearly connect the needs of employers with the skills and competencies of opportunity youth. With respect to the first point, an infrastructure that supports opportunity youth must be the familiar "soft place to fall" for opportunity youth, a place where both success and failure can be managed as youth engage with each of the various partners in the process. With respect to the second point, this infrastructure need not replace or replicate the services that are already offered by other stakeholders; instead, this infrastructure should support the work of these partners as well as opportunity youth alike. For example, the process of developing skills associated with career coaching is comprehensive in nature. Being able to search for jobs, understand needed credentials, create professional networks, and various other components are rarely led by a single organization. A sustained infrastructure can help multiple partners and stakeholders in creating a more integrated career coaching model in support of the student as he/she works toward reconnection. Lastly, with respect to the third point, defining the skills and competencies needed for each job requires a so-called heavy lift on the part of employers, workforce agencies, and training providers, but this is a requisite if individuals who are deemed disconnected are to be competitive in the mainstream workforce.

Accordingly, there are three main functions within this framework that deserve some explanation. The first two are generally recognized as necessary; the third is based on the use of demand-driven, evidence-based career pathways for disconnected youth.

1 – Community based organizations can serve as a conduit, in a near unique manner, on behalf of opportunity youth with the broad network of service providers and community based organizations.

CBOs have a long history of working with broad-based networks as part of their regular services, regardless of their primary function. These kinds of organizations naturally and historically organize efforts within regions. These organizations often have strategically important relationships with employers throughout their region; this is especially true for workforce agencies and training providers. The long-term trust and cooperation that many CBOs have developed with local employers can help position opportunity youth to connect with potential employment positions in a very effective manner.

This type of infrastructure is largely specific to CBOs as they serve individuals from multiple age cohorts, with multiple backgrounds, and multiple barriers. CBOs can host and manage overall case management efforts that provide familiar, comfortable, and confident relationships for opportunity youth. This isn't to say that these kinds of relationships aren't developed by other organizations, but when factoring in all components of this framework, these relationships are near unique to the CBO environment, especially with respect to long-term funding and consistency of services, as discussed later.

2 - Tailored, distinctive, and structured programs must be developed specifically for opportunity youth, paying attention to the many dynamics that impact the ability of an individual to succeed.

CBOs, workforce agencies, and training providers have a successful track record in developing programs specific to myriad workforce populations, especially populations that require consistent and sustained support for success. For example, training providers have been at the forefront of developing innovative programming that supports dislocated workers, especially those who have never set foot on a college campus. The ability and flexibility of a training provider to develop programming in short order is a significant component in the success of opportunity youth.

Another prime example of success has been the emergence of early and middle colleges in many secondary schools, CTEs, and community colleges across the country. As described earlier, these models exist to speed up the process by which high school students can complete their high school diploma and two-year degree. In some models, these organizations have adapted these programs to serve opportunity youth. For instance, Lansing Community College's High School Diploma Completion Initiative is designed for opportunity youth, but largely mirrors the academic programming that is employed for their middle college program, except for enhanced case management and student services support. In these instances, CBOs are the obvious home for innovative programming that can support opportunity youth. There are numerous examples of programming that can be tailored specifically to serve opportunity youth, and CBOs are uniquely positioned to lead this kind of innovation.

3 – Implement demand-driven, evidence-based career pathways as a tool to connect employers with opportunity youth for real, meaningful, and economically significant jobs.

The development of demand-driven, evidence-based career pathways integrates all of the aforementioned partners in the work of helping opportunity youth reconnect. Employers are engaged in ways that are not traditional; workforce agencies are able to support opportunity youth with traditional funding options that are, in many cases, readily available for these individuals; and training providers are able to grow and develop individuals in a manner that connects them directly to the mainstream workforce.

There are four primary components of this process, informed by a competency development model developed by Metrics Reporting (insert proper citation). The figure below illustrates the connection between foundational and occupational competencies, and helps explain the need for each of these four steps.

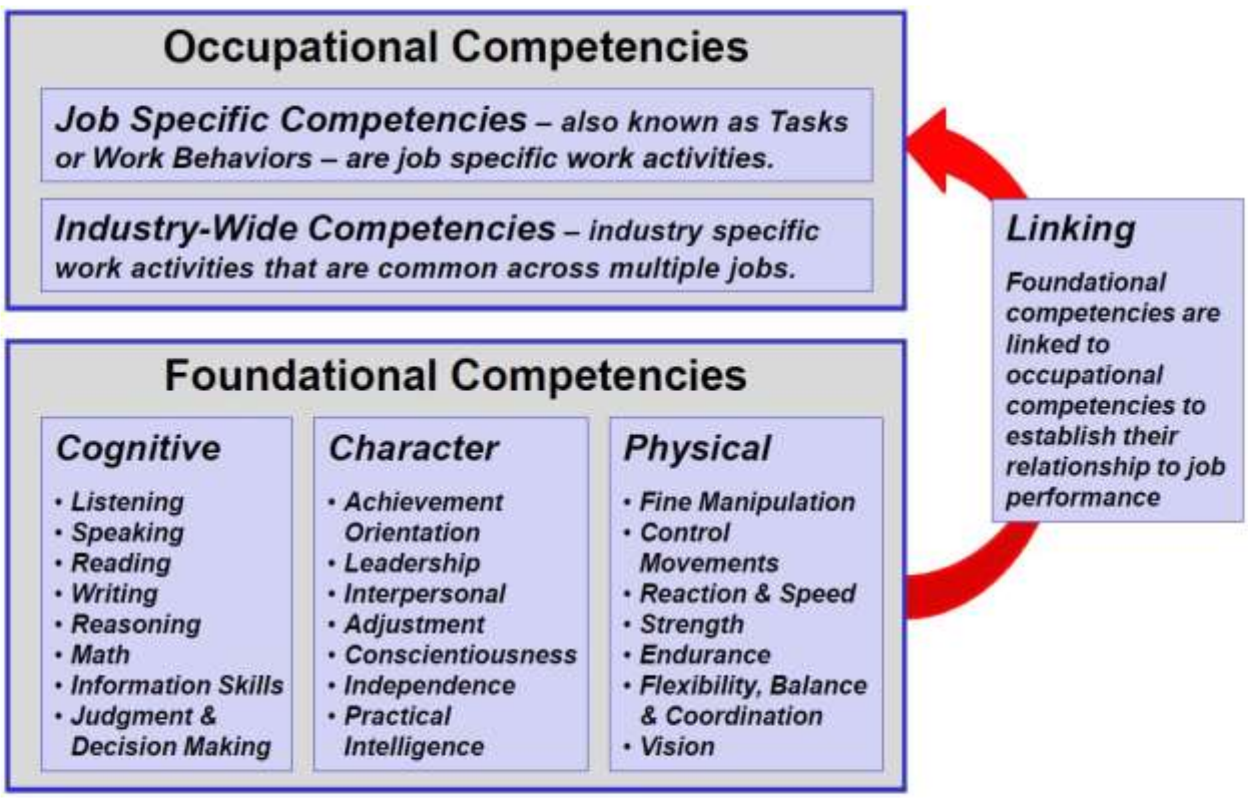

Figure A: Metrics Reporting, Inc., 2016.

Employers, whether they recognize it or not, are looking for the combination of both occupational and foundational competencies in the talent they onboard. All jobs require a healthy mix of foundational competencies and most jobs require specific occupational competencies. These specific occupational competencies are defined by industry/employer associations, employers directly, state and national regulations and statutes, and other various inputs. By understanding how each job connects to this model, demand-driven, evidence-based career pathways can be created.

Step 1 – Job Analyses

To identify if a specific job is relevant for opportunity youth, job analyses should be conducted to determine the specific competencies and skills needed to successfully complete the tasks associated with the job. Job analysis is a highly technical process that unearths the specific components that make up a job and links those components to occupation codes and classifications within resources, like the Occupational Information Network (O*NET) and other similar tools. Further, this process informs curriculum development, determination of accreditation requirements, and other similar functions.

Step 2 – Defined Competencies & Assessments

With a job analysis complete, the defined competencies can be culled and deemed either foundational or occupational, as depicted in the image above. Using resources like ONET can help ensure that a common language is used in describing the required competencies. The profile of competencies for each job analysis has powerful information. For instance, a specific skill or competency like critical thinking/reasoning or judgment/decision making (both foundational skills) can inform, both those that are disconnected and those that are helping them reconnect, with details on how valuable a specific skill is in the market place. Data from O*NET and the U.S. Department of Labor's website provides comprehensive information about what employers actually pay (on average) with respect to each skill or competency.

Understanding how competencies are valued by employers is a monumental shift forward in helping individuals explore career opportunities based on their skills and interests combined. In work led by Bill Guest of Metrics Reporting, Inc., tools, technology, and methodologies are beginning to be developed that connect the specific level and importance of foundational skills for nearly all jobs and job families in the O*NET system. Understanding competencies at the granular level, not at the macro level as represented by credentials, is a critical element in helping opportunity youth. Take, for instance, the example of math. As a competency, math is a nebulous and broad concept. Does math refer to technical math found in production, machining, or welding occupations? Does math refer to trigonometry or advanced calculus reserved for only a small portion of the workforce? What exactly does math mean? This is an important question, especially since career pathway and career coaching elements that are common in workforce development simply focus on the term "math" as an important competency for anyone seeking a good paying job. This, in and of itself, becomes a barrier, especially for disconnected populations who traditionally struggle with math competencies. The idea that math is a milestone that must be mastered for any good mainstream job does little to ease the struggle that many disconnected youth face.

In this example, breaking math down into competencies in a granular manner can begin to change the conversation about what a student needs to accomplish. Does an individual need to master math? Or does an individual need to have strong number facility? To what extent does an individual need math, and how important is math in any specific job? Building off the work of Guest helps position this kind of work in a remarkable way.

For disconnected youth, defining competencies and using appropriate assessment tools will help lead to reconnection. Specifically, using the technology developed by Guest will help ensure that individuals know specific targets for competencies, the competencies that are required for specific occupations, and employers will have the tools to understand the level of skill they need in various competency areas necessary for a successful workforce. This work is, therefore, important to include in career pathway and career coaching activities.

The chart below represents macro data, originally pulled from O*NET, that has been calculated to align specific competencies against market value. Pulling from the list of foundational competencies described above, this chart provides some key insights into a variety of knowledge domains for both cognitive/communicative and reasoning competencies. Two specific sub-domain competencies are included for each foundational competency listed.

Competency/ Sub-Domain	Description	Level	Importance	Market Value
Listening				
Active Listening	Basic comprehension, asking questions, not interrupting	80%	96%	$1714.30
Oral Comprehension	Listen to and understand information orally	95%	97%	$1912.84
Speaking				
Speaking	Talking to others to convey information effectively	73%	96%	$1541.27
Oral Expression	Ability to communicate information and ideas orally	93%	96%	$1713.49
Reading				
Reading	Understanding written sentences and paragraphs	78%	91%	$1455.81
Written Comprehension	Ability to read and understand information	85%	91%	$1610.03
Writing				
Writing	Communicating effectively in writing	67%	78%	$1350.50
Written Expression	Ability to communicate information and ideas	68%	83%	$1307.37
Reasoning				
Information Ordering	Ability to arrange things or actions in a certain order	85%	96%	$2454.07
Category Flexibility	Ability to generate or use different sets of rules	79%	93%	$2139.40
Math				
Mathematical Reasoning	Ability to choose the right math methods/formulas	34%	48%	$1157.61
Number Facility	Ability to add, subtract, multiply, or divide efficiently	34%	45%	$1205.67
Information Skills				
Getting Information	Observing, receiving, obtaining information	89%	96%	$1169.75
Processing Information	Compiling, coding, auditing, categorizing information	82%	89%	$983.65
Judgment & Decision Making				
Complex Problem Solving	Identifying complex problems to implement solutions	67%	89%	$2082.41
Judgment and Decision Making	Considering relevant costs & benefits of relevant actions	68%	92%	$2000.06

Figure B: Metrics Reporting, Inc., 2016.

It is important to understand just what this table represents. First, these competencies only represent two major domains of the foundational competencies used by Metrics Reporting (which are derived from O*NET) and represent all jobs in America. Second, the level rating represents the level of mastery for each competency that is required. Third, the importance rating represents the relevance of each competence as defined by job analyses; in other words, this rating represents how much math or information skills is used within the specific occupation. Fourth, the market value represents, based on current labor market data, the value of each 1% of competence, at the macro level, by the labor market. For example, when you examine the level of competence associated with a specific competency, for each

1% increase in a specific competency, the labor market rewards with an increase in the market value. This is of course at the macro and theoretical level and doesn't represent actual increases for an individual who achieves greater competency, but instead the current state of the job market and what employers currently pay for the entire workforce.

The application of this information has significant and important implications. First, assessments that measure specifically each of these foundational competencies need to be identified and/or developed. Many assessments already measure this content but aligning those assessments against this index is necessary to make sense of this information at the individual level. Second, individuals can begin to understand how their specific competencies in each of these foundational areas measure up against both the national average for all occupations as well as specific jobs and job families. Third, individuals can begin to make informed decisions once they understand the level and importance of a specific competency within a specific occupation, which are parts of Step 3 and Step 4.

Step 3 – Aligning Competencies to Credentials

Once the defined list of competencies has been completed, a link can be established with existing local and national credentials. Some of these may be industry credentials, some of these may be institution-based credentials, like a certificate of completion or a diploma. The goal is to determine what credentials an individual should complete in order to be relevant to the specific job that was first analyzed. Through this process, CBOs can accurately define the list of jobs that are suitable for opportunity youth who have limited credentials and mainstream workforce history. This process also helps determine what initial credentials should be achieved, whether it's a foundational skills assessment like the NCRC, or a short-term training certificate.

Step 4 – Creation of a Career Pathway

Once steps 1-3 have been completed, an individual can complete, with the support of CBOs, a demand-driven, evidence-based career pathway. This kind of career pathway is specific to the individual and defines the career and training aspirations of the individual, while also recognizing the support they need in order to be successful.

This kind of pathway is demand-driven because it ties directly back to the specific jobs that employers have within the region. The pathway is evidence-based because it is built off of the defined skills and competencies related to the exact qualifications necessary for a specific job, linked to sources like O*NET. The image below highlights a sample career pathway tool developed by the National Career Pathway Technical Assistance Center.

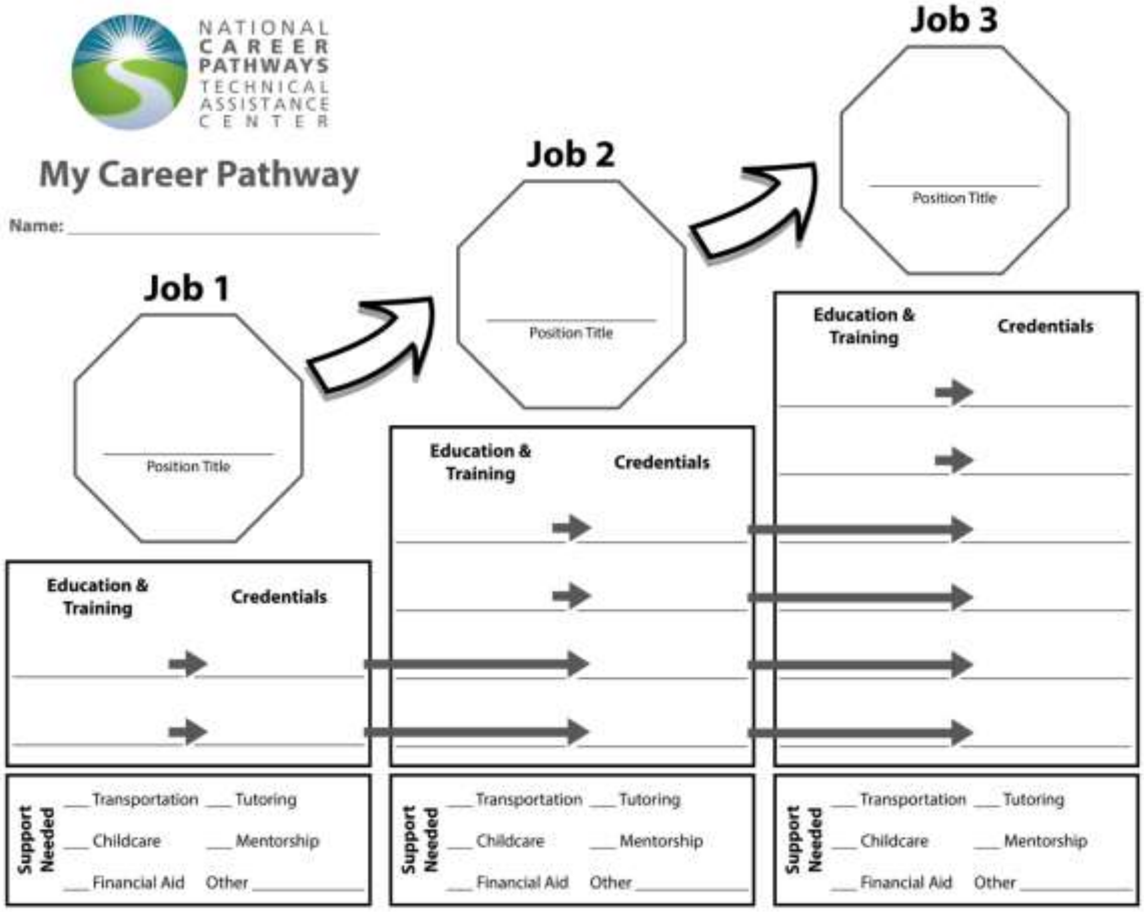

Figure C: NCPTAC, 2016.

A NEW KIND OF APPROACH

By using these four steps, CBOs can organize the efforts of the local workforce development infrastructure, the opportunity youth, and employers in a consistent and equitable process. This kind of work is also sustainable, as a job analysis completed for one organization has great applicability for other employers as well. For instance, an environmental services technician in healthcare has great transferability and portability in other industries, like retail and hospitality.

This approach also brings a level of engagement and investment to employers that is often difficult to acquire. The process of using demand-driven, evidence-based strategies has worked successfully with other workforce populations. In the West Michigan region, a major employer experienced a significant increase in diverse hires (defined as non-white), reduced first year turnover of staff, and saw significant savings in reduced costs and increased efficiencies. This becomes a compelling argument to employers of any size and helps to generate employer investment.

CHALLENGES

No framework or conceptual model can adequately address all components surrounding an identified challenge, as is the case with this framework. While there are legitimate shortcomings that can be defined with this framework, including the assertion that helping individuals who are deemed disconnected is often a case-by-case process and that few overarching strategies work effectively for all participants. Nevertheless, this framework presents an opportunity to change, over the long-term, processes and practices through which communities support opportunity youth.

An important part of understanding the application of this framework is addressing and acknowledging its associated challenges. Three major challenges were identified through both interviews and the literature review that preceded the writing of this research paper. These items are addressed briefly here:

- CBOs are all too often asked to take on the problems and challenges of various workforce populations, resulting in the constant struggle of institutions to fight "being all things to all people". Accordingly, any integration of this framework would need to be done in a fashion that fully supports the work with necessary financial and human capital.
- There are shortcomings with O*NET and related tools, just as there are shortcomings with any large scale tool. O*NET, developed by the U.S. Department of Labor, is highly underutilized and represents the most significant and comprehensive tool of its kind in the entire world. Using O*NET to help define skills and competencies is an important part of this work, as it helps create common language among all stakeholders. Exceptions and/or variances to O*NET data will certainly occur and can/should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.
- Not all employers are "created equal", in short. Some employers aren't aware of the skills and competencies they need, nor are they capable of fully utilizing the benefits of a job analysis. The kind of work described within this framework should be completed with not only "early adopters", but also with those that are able to benefit from this kind of work in the first place. However, it's important to note that employers who aren't considered early adopters or who have an inability to benefit, at least right away, should also be included in long-term strategy that can aid in opportunity youth reconnection. That is a tall order, but one that should not be neglected over the long-term.

NEXT STEPS AND LARGE-SCALE IMPLICATIONS

There are numerous components to understand with respect to this paper. The following items are meant to serve as a starting point for making these items real.

- Assessments should be identified and/or developed that better measure and/or index an individual's foundational competencies against the O*NET database that can be aligned with hiring requirements for the local workforce.
- Employers should consider incorporating assessments that measure foundational competencies, as defined within this paper, in order to better understand how disconnected youth can participate in mainstream employment.
- Training providers, workforce agencies, and community-based organizations should directly connect opportunity youth with employers in a variety of functions beyond simple employment, including apprenticeships, externships/internships, and paid work experiences that provide the means for disconnected youth to re-engage with the mainstream work environment.

REFERENCES

Allen, L., Almeida, C., & Steinberg, A. (2004). From the prison track to the college track: Pathways to postsecondary success for out-of-school youth. Jobs for the Future.

Belfield, C. R., Levin, H. M., & Rosen, R. (2012). The economic value of opportunity youth. Corporation for National and Community Service.

Bloom, D. (2010). Programs and policies to assist high school dropouts in the transition to adulthood. The Future of Children, 20(1), 89-108.

Bragg, D. D. (2011). Examining pathways to and through the community college for youth and adults. In Higher education: Handbook of theory and research, 355-393. Springer Netherlands.

Bridgeland, J. M., & Milano, J. A. (2012). Opportunity road: The promise and challenge of America's forgotten youth. Civic Enterprises.

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Job openings and labor turnover – May 2016, U.S. Department of Labor. http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/jolts.pdf

Datnow, A., Solorzano, D. G., Watford, T., & Park, V. (2010). Mapping the terrain: The state of knowledge regarding low-income youth access to postsecondary education. Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 15(1-2), 1-8.

Edelman, P. B., & Holzer, H. J. (2013). Connecting the disconnected: Improving education and employment outcomes among disadvantaged youth.

Edley, C., & Ruiz de Velasco, J. (2010). Changing places: How communities will improve the health of boys of color. Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Race, Ethnicity and Diversity.

Fernandes-Alcantara, A. L. (2012). Vulnerable youth: employment and job training programs. Congressional Research Service.

Flanagan, C., Levine, P., & Settersten, R. (2009). Civic engagement and the changing transition to adulthood. Medford, MA: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

Forgotten youth: Re-engaging students through dropout recovery. (2012). Boston, MA: Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy.

Garvey, J. (2010). Towards a new model of success for disconnected youth: CBO-community college partnerships. Youth Development Institute.

Grubb, W. N. (2003). Using community colleges to reconnect disconnected youth. Menlo Park.

Grubb, W. N., Badway, N., & Bell, D. (2003). Community colleges and the equity agenda: The potential of noncredit education. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 586(1), 218-240.

Guest, J. W. (2016). Talxcellenz [technology software]. Michigan.

Hair, E. C., Moore, K. A., Ling, T. J., McPhee-Baker, C., & Brown, B. V. (2009). Youth who are "disconnected" and those who then reconnect: Assessing the influence of family, programs, peers and communities. Child Trends, 37, 1-8.

Hoffman, N. (2003). College credit in high school: Increasing college attainment rates for underrepresented students. Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 35(4), 42-48.

Holzer, H. J. (2007). Reconnecting young black men: What policies would help?. The State of Black America, 75-87.

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact.

MacDonald, R., & Marsh, J. (2001). Disconnected youth?. Journal of Youth Studies, 4(4), 373-391.

Merlo, A., & Wolpin, K. I. (2009). The transition from school to jail: Youth crime and high school completion among black males, second version.

Mullin, C. M. (2012). It's a matter of time: Low-income students and community colleges. AACC Policy Brief 2012-02PBL. American Association of Community Colleges (NJ1).

Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., Coca, V., & Moeller, E. (2008). From high school to the future: Potholes on the road to college. Research Report. Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Steinberg, A., & Almeida, C. (2004). The dropout crisis: Promising approaches in prevention and recovery. Jobs for the Future.

Sullivan, P. J., & Larson, R. W. (2009). Connecting youth to high-resource adults: Lessons from effective youth programs. Journal of Adolescent Research.

The United Way ALICE Project, United Way ALICE Report – Michigan, September 2014. http://www.unitedwayalice.org/documents/14UW%20ALICE%20Report_MI_Lowres_10.24.15.pdf

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. Harvard Educational Review, 79(3), 409-428.

Tyler, J. H., & Lofstrom, M. (2009). Finishing high school: Alternative pathways and dropout recovery. The future of children, 19(1), 77-103.

Venkatesh, S. A. (2006). Off the books: The underground economy of the urban poor. Harvard University Press.

White house council for community solutions: Community solutions for opportunity youth final report. (2012). Washington, D.C.: The White House.

Wight, V., Chau, M. M., Aratani, Y., Schwarz, S. W., & Thampi, K. (2010). A profile of disconnected young adults in 2010.

About REI

The MSU EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation (REI) seeks to identify and develop new economic development tools, models, policies and practices to support innovative economic development high-growth enterprises and job creation in distressed regions across the state. REI has established a new economic development ecosystem to cope with the ever-changing global and regional dynamic(s). Through this ecosystem, we engage innovative and creative minds which result in new economic development practices.

The REI University Center was establsihed in 2011 with support from the U.S Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration, and in collaboration with the following Michigan State Univeristy offices:
Office of the Provost
Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies
University Outreach and Engagement
MSU Extension Office
Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
School of Planning, Design and Construction
Department of Geography
College of Social Science

Michigan State University
EDA University Center for
Regional Economic Innovation

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
Center for Community and
Economic Development
University Center for Regional Economic Innovation

EDA
U.S. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION