

ORIENTING TOWARD CHANGE

This practice brief is part of a series highlighting pedagogical strategies that supported youth social and emotional well-being during the summer of 2020. These approaches acknowledged both their present realities as youth coped with the pandemic, and their future lives as they prepared to pursue professional opportunities.

It draws on a larger study and report, **Youth Empowerment Summer: Crisis Response and Lessons for the Future of Collective Action and Work-based Learning**, which analyzed and documented the efforts of a New York City-based coalition of advocates, educators, community leaders, and youth activists. The YES coalition organized in 2020 following the onset of Covid-19 to create conditions that provided the city's most vulnerable youth with robust work-based learning experiences during a period of uncertainty, precarity, and unprecedented need.

Find the full report on the YES coalition and other practice briefs at www.yes2020.nyc

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ORIENTING TOWARD CHANGE WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Not all youth know what they want to do with their careers, nor do their career trajectories always follow linear pathways. Furthermore, careers and industries dynamically change over time—some collapse while new ones emerge. And as youth transition into college programs and new jobs, they may find their transition period to be difficult and stressful.

Taken together, many youth will experience social and emotional needs around adjusting to nonlinear career trajectories, unstable work landscapes, and novel professional environments. If these social and emotional needs are not adequately addressed, youth may experience declines in their social and psychological well-being during major shifts in national labor markets (Helve & Evans, 2013), as well as in their own personal transitions from school to college (Hays & Oxley, 1986; Larose & Boivin, 1998).

Three pedagogical strategies that programs used to orient youth to change are featured here:

- + **normalize uncertainty during career exploration**
- + **research the changing work landscape**
- + **provide mentors to help youth ease into transition periods**

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“For many students, hearing the stories of other professionals has been such a breath of fresh air to know that they don’t have to have it all together, to acknowledge the social pressures that they feel from friends and family members to have everything together.”

He was like, ‘You know, I thought I wanted to be pre-med and my family wanted me to be pre-med. I hate it. I don’t know what to do. I don’t even know what I’m interested in.’ ... I think he’s a student who has fronted that he knows himself very well for a while, and it was cool to see him in that place where he’s starting to sit back and he’s like ‘Okay, maybe I do need to figure out these things, and how I show up in the world and what I want.’

QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

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- What steps is your program taking to help youth:
- + Normalize uncertainty in the career exploration process?
 - + Research the changing work landscape?
 - + Prepare for and adjust to major transition phases?

ORIENTING TOWARD CHANGE NORMALIZE UNCERTAINTY

What did we see?

Adola Sani, program director for Finance You, worked to normalize the notion that a career trajectory can consist of unknowns, obstacles, and changes in direction. To interrupt the mainstream narrative that career trajectories should be predetermined and unwavering—along with all the societal pressure that comes with such a narrative—she leveraged her professional network to host career panels of guest speakers that spoke directly to the difficulties they faced and the directions they explored.

These career panels provided program participant Isabel Mencia with “a nice reminder to just keep my mind open to other careers out there.” Isabel began to see career exploration as a normal part of the process, and started to look beyond her initial interest in health care. She deliberated about her options in the following way: “My experience in my lab at my college, it does make me think, ‘What if I just go for a master’s degree in biology, or a PhD, and just do research?’ ‘Cause I don’t know, it is fun. I don’t know if I have a burning passion for it, but it is fun, and it’s nice because you’re not dealing with people’s lives like you are in health care. It’s less weight on your shoulders because no one’s life is on the line. So I think about that a lot, especially this year.”

Isabel credited Finance You for showing her that there are many careers that she didn’t know about and felt that, “it’s just a matter of me finding them and if they’re a good fit for me.”

YOUTH

“Some of the speakers we had in Finance You, they did say that they didn’t always know what career they wanted, and not knowing is okay and exploring is normal.

I’m not as certain as I was before. Before Finance You and even last year, I was more certain that I wanted a career in health care, but now I’m not sure anymore. Which is normal.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“We’ve had three different speakers from a variety of experiences, an art background, technical background, sales background. And that’s to really encourage students, to expose them to various careers and help them to learn that ‘I don’t need to have it all together or know exactly what I wanna do right now, or even by the time I graduate.’”

ORIENTING TOWARD CHANGE RESEARCH THE CHANGING WORK LANDSCAPE

What did we see?

Finance You organized its curriculum around focal Project Based Learning questions that asked youth, “What digital careers exist in the new normal?” and “How can students and families survive and thrive in the new normal?”

A series of research and reflection activities helped youth to deepen their answers to these questions. In one activity, youth watched news videos and formulated ten tips for surviving a crisis from a financial standpoint. In another activity, youth watched CNBC report trends around which job types were declining, on the

one hand, and increasing, on the other. In another, they read through the LinkedIn Jobs Report to identify high-growth sectors.

After each activity, youth were prompted to identify jobs that interested them, to explain why, and to read job descriptions. As they figured out what skills those jobs require, they were asked to reflect on the question, “If these are the skills that I need to be building, what’s one skill that I want to build over the next six months?”

Program participant Isabel Mencia shared that a research activity around “making a budget for yourself and trying to discover ways you can earn more money” directly led her to becoming a tutor. She also felt inspired by an activity in which she had to research several people—youth, young adults, and adults—whose businesses were thriving and who could serve as role models.

YOUTH

“ So one of the [role models] I chose was a little girl, and she had her own T-shirt business, where she just promoted happiness and being proud of her skin color. And another business owner who made her own curly hair product line.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ We slightly adjusted our program with three main goals due to the catastrophe of the pandemic. So our number one goal is to expose youth to digital careers in the new normal, equip them with financial literacy skills, and equip them with a professional network.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ How can you know what you want if you don’t know what’s out there?

ORIENTING TOWARD CHANGE PROVIDE MENTORS TO EASE TRANSITIONS

What did we see?

One program brought in representatives from approximately ten colleges and universities to help youth understand the college admission process and what to expect once they are on campus. The admission counselors from these schools gave virtual campus tours, as well as general admission advice, including writing the college essay and building an admissions brand.

In Empathy Unbound, youth were matched with near-peer mentors from the City University of New York (CUNY). Many of the youth in the

program were either already attending CUNY, were about to begin their first semester at CUNY, or were thinking about going to CUNY. The CUNY mentors led multiple meetings with the youth over the summer and shared professional tools and skills to help prepare youth for their transition to college life.

One of the program directors of Empathy Unbound also had an affiliation with CUNY, and created plans to provide future mentoring to youth in the program who would go on to attend CUNY. This director planned for the one-on-one mentoring experience to include a series of “real talks” on topics that go beyond what is normally taught at freshman orientation. Additionally, guest speakers who are women of color created plans to lead talks on issues around health and wellness for the youth who transitioned from the summer program into CUNY.

YOUTH

“ We still keep in touch with her and she does help us as far as being that I’m in college, so she gave me a mentor and I was able to be better in college.

Each time I listened to a speaker talk, I always wrote down notes because there was never a point where I couldn’t take anything they said into account or apply it to my own life. It was like everything was relatable; even if I couldn’t use it right now in the present, I could still use it for the future.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ These girls are going to have a leg up when they get into these freshman classes.