

Developing Professionals

By Nicolette Berte, Keanna King, Michelle Demars, and Michael M. Brownstein

Lessons from a program for recent high school graduates reinforce the importance of advisers, mentors, and learning communities to support student growth and professional capacity.

To develop the cognitive, social, and career skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace, students must learn to think creatively, apply their skills innovatively, and take risks constructively (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004). Implicit in this position is the expectation that students will have the self-confidence to apply their knowledge in both familiar and new settings and feel connected to the world at large to share what they know with others. We are working to accomplish these goals through Year Up, an organization that is designed to help young adults bridge secondary to postsecondary opportunities.

Personalizing students' learning experiences is central to Year Up's philosophy that success depends on creating an environment in which students feel safe enough to learn from their mistakes; where instructors provide honest, nonthreatening feedback; and where all students are able to demonstrate their mastery of knowledge and skills in ways that are personally meaningful (Brownstein, DiMartino, & Miles, 2007). By applying this philosophy consistently, caring adults can have a lasting influence on the trajectory of a young adult's life. Although Year Up is designed as a yearlong program for 18- to 24-year-old students who have already graduated (see figure 1), the lessons learned over the course of running our program have implications for secondary school leaders.

Lessons Learned

Learning is personalized for students in Year Up through individual student advising, mentors, and two weekly meetings that are designed to build community among students and staff members. These three areas yield important information that transcends a particular situation and is relevant at any level.

Advising

Trusting relationships between students and staff members are at the heart of keeping students engaged, and professional training to support those relationships is key. Most staff members serve as advisers for three to eight students, depending upon the site, the number of students it serves, and the number of staff members it employs.

Advisers guide each advisee along his or her individual journey of discovering his or her strengths as a student, a community member, and a young professional. During the first five months of the program, the

Through Personalization

advisers' main objectives are to assess and provide constant feedback about students' job readiness. During students' six-month apprenticeships, advisers connect with them on a regular basis to follow their progress and provide support as needed. As they near graduation and for a few months afterward, advisers support students in their pursuits of career and further education.

The time and effort that are involved in providing appropriate professional development for adult role models cannot be underestimated. Advisers must be able to differentiate their efforts to meet each student's unique needs and personal goals (Dalley-Trim, Alloway, Patterson, & Walker, 2007) but there also must be consistency. To establish consistency, advisers must have training and access to resources that will help them manage situations that might be outside of their realm of expertise. In middle level and high schools, principals play a key role in ensuring that advisers and other adult advocates are able to acquire the skills and tools they need to successfully serve students.

Considerable care must also be taken to match students with advisers. During orientation week, staff members meet to discuss their first impressions of each student in terms of his or her potential strengths and areas for growth. On the basis of these impressions and any initial connections that may have developed between students and staff members in the first week of the program, the staff members who are dedicated to a cohort of students decide which team members and students might be good matches.

Helping students feel that they belong to a caring professional community is one of the cornerstones of the program. Watching their acceptance of this support and their transformation into young professionals is one of its many positive outcomes. For example, after noticing that Aaron was not in class during the third week, his adviser called him at home that evening. "I had to take a personal day today....Was that a problem?" Aaron asked. "Have I done something else wrong?" When the adviser explained that he was concerned about Aaron's absence and wanted to make sure that everything was all right, Aaron was both puzzled and pleased. "You just called to check in on me? No, that's cool.... I just don't think I've ever had anyone



Why Personalization Works

Advising, mentoring, and belonging to a learning community benefit young adults because they are founded on the belief that these key components are missing in many people's lives. Strong role models who set examples and are consistently supportive positive forces are most instrumental to their students' successes. Advisers, mentors, and learning community members take a deliberate approach in their support role to ensure that students are productive and successful. Components of the program include the following:

Meaningful connections. Students feel that they are receiving the attention to development and growth that they deserve.

Individualized assessment. Students are formally evaluated twice during their first six months in the program by all of the staff members in their learning community and on an ongoing basis by their adviser. The adviser reviews each evaluation with his or her advisee and determines the next steps.

Individualized goal setting and action planning. Each student has different needs, which requires advisers to tailor their approach depending on students' skills, abilities, and goals. Although some students may have practiced goal setting in the past, many have not created clear, executable plans on how to reach these goals. Action planning teaches students how to mobilize around those goals and take actionable steps to reach them. An adviser ensures that the student is accountable to this plan.

Accountability. Advisers help set program expectations and explain the consequences for when expectations are met or not met. Advisers are instrumental in helping each student understand the expectations outlined in the student contract and how to address each of the areas.

Regular feedback that acknowledges, measures, and pushes progress. Advisers meet weekly with advisees to determine each student's strengths and areas for growth. High-performing students focus on creating and building opportunities for leadership. Students who need improvement or who are in danger of "firing themselves" are put on action plans that outline specific steps that they should take to improve.

Collaborative coaching style. Advisers take a coaching rather than directive approach in helping advisees. Guidance in problem solving teaches students that they are ultimately the owners of their learning experience, both the successes and the challenges.

Building the skill of trust building. To grow and become self-actualized, students must place a certain amount of trust in the program, in the expectations, and in the idea that these changes will lead to positive outcomes. Although the student is ultimately responsible for building trust, the school or the program is responsible for creating a safe place to build trusting relationships. The adviser relationship is the first and one of the most important relationships students have at Year Up.

do that before." That kind of commitment and concern can have the same effect at any level.

Mentoring

Training, support, and careful matchmaking are also crucial to meaningful mentoring efforts. Every student who is admitted into the program is assigned a mentor who provides support as the student makes the transition from the classroom to the corporate environment. The program itself is designed to allow mentors and students to build a relationship while managing their busy schedules; mentors are required to meet their student in person once a month and check in by phone or e-mail once a week. Mentors assist students in a number of areas—navigating the corporate culture, building relationships with coworkers, and making a positive and lasting impression on their supervisors. As graduation approaches, mentors also provide support with résumés, interviewing skills, and financial aid and the col-

lege application process—all of which have correlations to secondary school.

At first, students may be skeptical about the support that mentors will be able to provide. A common challenge is trying to explain the benefits of a mentoring relationship to 18- to 24-year-old young adults, most of whom have made it thus far by surviving on their own. To David, the idea of having a mentor was silly and weird. "I don't need a mentor," he said. "What are we going to talk about? What can a mentor teach me? And why does he care?"

To overcome such wariness, a lot of effort is given to selecting mentors and matching students with them. Each mentor fills out an application and comes in for a tour of Year Up. Before the matching process begins, it is extremely important for Year Up staff members to meet all the mentors. Both mentors and students experience anxiety about the first meeting and the progression of the relationship, which is why Year Up hosts trainings for mentors and

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students to provide guidance for the first interaction and the expectations as they move forward.

One of the challenges that are involved in creating a vital mentoring program is providing appropriate support to prospective mentors who possess the same sense of skepticism about their ability to *be* a mentor as students do about their need for one. The comment we hear most often from potential mentors is, “I don’t know that I have anything to offer.” Our response is, “Have you ever written a résumé, interviewed for a job, had a supervisor, or worked within a team? If so, you have valuable skills that can help support students from the classroom to the professional world.” By building on adult mentors’ strengths, constructive and meaningful relations are formed between the student and the mentor.

Now David and his mentor meet once a week. They occasionally play golf on the weekends and are engaging in a job search together as David prepares for graduation. When we ask David about his mentor, the simple response is, “Yeah, he’s a cool guy.” As he enters the job market, David has a personal coach helping him become a professional.

Learning Community

The holistic, systematic approach of a learning community enhances students’ experiences in the program from one phase to the next. A learning community can range from 30 to 40 students and a group of 8 to 10 staff members depending on the site. Students are placed in a learning community according to their desired marketable skills tracks (i.e., investment operations or information technology). The learning community staff members represent each department to provide some diversity. Each staff member is an adviser to 3 to 8 students, facilitates and creates feedback sessions, and teaches professional skills.

Having a strong student orientation promotes the program’s core values and a set of rules that establish expectations, rewards, and consequences for everyone. Creating a sense of trust, transparency, and accountability in the beginning sets the tone for a strong group dynamic later on in the program.

One of the most empowering aspects of the learning community is the Friday feedback session. At the end of each week, all staff members and students gather for two hours to reconnect and actively participate in team-building activities. A session may include announcements, a warm-up question, interactive exercises, feedback, a contract report (or a performance reading), and an evaluation. This teaches students how to communicate, as well as how to process and promote changes of behavior and mind-set in themselves and others inside or outside of a work setting. Feedback teaches students how to receive and learn from positive reinforcement and constructive criticism.

During feedback, each person quietly reflects on what strengths and growth areas they would like to share with a peer or a staff member. For example, at a recent feedback session, Wil, a business communications instructor, offered feedback to Kevin: “Kevin, it has been a pleasure seeing your professional growth in these few weeks. Your strengths are that you show leadership among your peers and you are motivated. Something you can work on to improve your professionalism is to be more positive. Although you

Developing and Sustaining a **Personalized Environment**

- Recognize the importance of relationships between students and adult role models (Milliken, 2007).
- Provide ongoing, high-quality training to staff members and other school stakeholders to help students’ own their learning experiences.
- Develop effective student support systems in which students are matched with caring adult role models.
- Establish high expectations for student performance and a means by which students can meet them.
- Create learning experiences in which students can find personal relevance in what they are studying and know that what they learn can be used to solve real-world problems.

Reference: Milliken, B. (2007). *The last dropout: Stop the epidemic*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.

Figure 1.

Year Up

Year Up is a one-year, intensive training program that provides urban young adults (ages 18–24) with a unique combination of technical and professional skills, college credits, an educational stipend, and corporate apprenticeship. During the first six months, participants focus on skill mastery in either information technology or investment operations. Equal emphasis is placed on developing the professional skills that are required in the workplace. During the second six months, students are placed in apprenticeships with local partner companies. Currently Year Up is serving more than 600 students with program offices in Boston, MA; Providence, RI; New York City; Arlington, VA; and San Francisco, CA. In March 2009, a program office will be opened in Atlanta, GA. For more information about Year Up, visit www.yearup.org.

have leadership qualities, your negativity toward situations causes more problems. Use your leadership position in a positive way to help empower people.”

A goal of feedback is to provide students with low-risk opportunities to develop a professional voice—one that is focused on being proactive, specific, and supportive—to promote team building. Another example of a feedback session looks like this: Jake is the first to raise his hand. He would like to give feedback to one of his peers. Jake makes eye contact with Jessica. “Jessica, your strengths are that you are very helpful. I feel like I can go to you with any questions and you don’t mind helping me. For a growth area, I would like you to take better care of yourself and your work. You get distracted sometimes by being so helpful to everyone else that you don’t complete your assignments on time.”

Having a learning community helps strengthen a group on various levels. Students and staff members embark on this journey together. Effective learning can occur within a community if all participants are willing to trust, support, lead, and follow. It is crucial for all staff members to be committed to modeling appropriate attitudes, behaviors, and communication skills. Consistency enhances the overall program experience for students and staff members.

A Final Note

Personalizing students’ learning experiences holds the promise of helping them make meaningful connections be-

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tween what they know and what they are able to do in their postsecondary lives. Students’ success is directly connected to being actively engaged in planning and developing their personal and professional pathways, which are based on their individual talents, interests, and aspirations (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008). By systemically engaging with adult role models in a variety of ways, students learn that who they are as people is as important as what they can do.

School leaders at all levels should consider how educational experiences can be organized to push students to their personal limits while providing them with an extensive support network to prepare them for the postsecondary opportunities that await them. From our experience working with young adults, we know that they have a need to find personal relevance in their studies, develop strong interpersonal skills, learn to manage change, and grow to become leaders in and contributing members of their communities. We hope what we have learned can help secondary schools as they work with students and offer an interim step for those students who need more personalized assistance to achieve their goals. **PL**

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Nicolette Berte (nberte@yearup.org) is the director of program and student services at Year Up in Washington, DC.

Keanna King (kking@yearup.org) is a site leader at Year Up in New York City

Michelle Demars (mdemars@yearup.org) is the development and volunteer manager at Year Up in Boston, MA.

Michael M. Brownstein (mbrownstein@yearup.org) is the national director of academics and program for Year Up.