What Works Cities
Economic Mobility Initiative
NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans: Paving the way to promising careers

The City of New Orleans wants to ensure that local talent has more equitable access to job opportunities in high-growth and high-paying industries. To achieve this objective, the City partnered with YouthForce NOLA, an education, business, and civic collaborative that builds bridges between school and work. As part of the What Works Cities (WWC) Economic Mobility Initiative, the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) supported and evaluated YouthForce NOLA's high school internship and training program. This memo summarizes our high-level findings along with some recommended next steps.

THE
BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS TEAM

What Works Cities — ECONOMIC MOBILITY

⚠ Issue Motivation

High-growth industries such as technology, healthcare, business services, skilled trades, and advanced manufacturing are thriving in New Orleans. Along with this growth comes opportunities for high-paying jobs. However, these businesses are having trouble recruiting local talent for their open positions. Therefore the job growth is not fully benefiting New Orleanians. The main reasons employers give for recruiting outside of Orleans Parish are that local job seekers lack the technical and soft skills required to fill the open positions or have not had access to relevant experiences in those industries. In an effort to address the skill and experience mismatch between demand and supply in the local labor market, the City of New Orleans decided to support the work of innovative career pathway intermediaries such as YouthForce NOLA (YouthForce). Solving this issue would foster economic mobility in the region, and it would allow students of color experiencing poverty to have more equitable access to job opportunities.

"I've learned so much in such little time that a lot of my peers didn't learn. [I would tell others that the] Things they would learn if they joined would be essential and would really push them forward."

— YouthForce NOLA intern

Our Approach

Since 2015, YouthForce has provided an internship and training program for high school students. The program helps students develop both technical and soft skills by attending training sessions, and it allows them to gain work experience at local companies in high-growth industries through the internship component. As part of the WWC Economic Mobility Initiative, YouthForce identified two opportunities for program improvements to the pilot, which would enhance the quality of internships, the equity of the enrollment process, and enable the program to more easily scale:

1 **YouthForce, supported by BIT, piloted playbooks that enable supervisors to deliver high-quality internships.** Internship supervisors – especially those with less experience hosting high school-level interns – often struggle to develop age-appropriate projects for their interns. In response to this, BIT supported YouthForce in designing and evaluating high-quality, age-appropriate internship manuals known as playbooks. The playbooks were designed to prepare any supervisor to host a successful internship, regardless of whether they had previous experience. They contain planning tips, instructions to create tasks that build soft skills, and scripts and tips on how to provide feedback.

2 **BIT helped YouthForce design a more equitable and less cumbersome enrollment process for the 2020 pilot.** YouthForce estimated that more than 50 youth (~20% of applicants) were deterred from participating in their 2019 summer internship program due to complex requirements from funders, state mandated work permits, and/or proof of guardianship. To help mitigate these hurdles, BIT worked with YouthForce to streamline the enrollment process. We highlighted opportunities for applicants and accepted participants to receive staff support, secured approval for alternative ways to satisfy entry requirements, and produced youth-facing and staff-facing materials to navigate the paperwork collection process. These changes aimed to alleviate the documentation burden that applicants face, with special consideration for students of color experiencing poverty who – despite being those who sometimes stand to gain the most from the program – are the most likely to be deterred by the complexity of the process.

COVID-19 Modifications

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were some changes both in the project timeline and the intervention and evaluation activities originally planned:

* Due to the pandemic, the pilot internship program abruptly moved to be virtual in late March 2020 (the spring 2020 cohort). Despite this, BIT was able to conduct interviews with participants and supervisors to gather key insights for improving future internship materials.

* YouthForce pivoted their summer 2020 internships to be fully virtual. BIT helped YouthForce shift the documentation collection processes online and paused all evaluation efforts until the following summer.

* Spring and summer 2021 internships remained virtual due to the ongoing pandemic. BIT supported YouthForce in these efforts and resumed evaluation activities at the end of the summer 2021 internships.

⊗✓ Methodology

BIT conducted a formative evaluation of this intervention work. The evaluation consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data collected during the intervention period (February 2020 through September 2021).

The data sources for this evaluation included surveys administered to supervisors at the end of each internship cycle, as well as qualitative interviews conducted with both supervisors and interns. The objective of this evaluation was two-fold:

1 YouthForce wanted to determine whether they should continue to produce supervisor playbooks. Beyond that, they offered two types of playbooks (off-the-shelf and customized playbooks) and wanted to know which was more effective. To answer this two-part question, BIT looked at:

    a. Which types of playbooks were used, and how supervisors used them;

    b. How playbooks impacted the supervisors' experience; and

    c. Which aspects of the playbooks supervisors think could be improved.

2 YouthForce sought to assess whether the changes made to the enrollment process (in 2020) had in fact reduced the documentation burden for students. To understand this, BIT investigated:

    a. Which documentation requirements caused the most problems for students;

    b. The extent to which documentation hurdles prevented students from entering internships; and

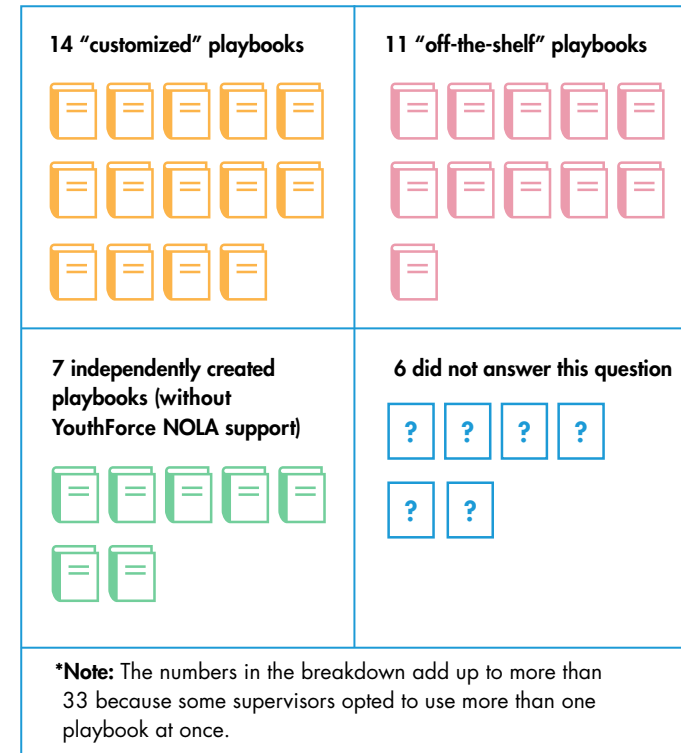   c. If the resources helped students overcome documentation-related barriers.

🔍 Findings

Survey and interview data indicate that YouthForce playbooks have proved to be useful to supervisors:

* Most supervisors used a YouthForce playbook (83%), with many preferring the customizable version. (See Figure 1.);
* Less experienced supervisors relied more heavily on the playbooks;
* Supervisors consulted the playbooks to generate project ideas, for communication tips, and general guidance; and
* A few supervisors found the playbooks to be too long, and others indicated that they were designed at a more advanced level.

Figure 1: Playbook Usage

In spring and summer 2021, the 33* supervisors used….

14 "customized" playbooks	11 "off-the-shelf" playbooks
7 independently created playbooks (without YouthForce NOLA support)	6 did not answer this question

*Note: The numbers in the breakdown add up to more than 33 because some supervisors opted to use more than one playbook at once.

Evaluation findings suggest that the revised enrollment process (in spring 2020) reduced the burden of documentation on students:

* Intern interviews did not report any challenges with documentation, which was previously a common issue;
* The additional touchpoints and orientation events served to keep prospective interns on track;
* Allowing for residency certification to be verified through schools (rather than strictly through a parent or guardian) greatly simplified the documentation process; and
* Informal conversations with the YouthForce team indicate that even after implementing the process changes, a significant portion of staff time is still required to complete the documentation process for each student and address rare yet complex documentation issues.

⬀ Scaling Opportunities & Recommendations

Thanks to its internship and training program, YouthForce has paved the way for more and more young people to access promising job opportunities in the New Orleans area, fostering economic mobility in the region. Below are a set of recommendations intended to help YouthForce sustain, scale, and share the processes and the materials they developed.

Continue to promote the use of the existing playbooks (off-the-shelf and customizable), while making selected tweaks

The success of the playbooks, especially among less experienced supervisors, means that they should continue to be used across YouthForce's internship programs. We recommend making a couple of improvements, such as: **1)** working with a designer to enhance the format of the templates so that it is easier to skim, and **2)** sharing editable versions of the off-the-shelf playbooks to allow supervisors to make small edits.

Create and maintain a 'Hall of Fame' of custom playbooks from previous cohorts

We recommend compiling a list of the most successful custom playbooks and adding them to a newly established playbook database on the (with relevant supervisors' permission). This way, future YouthForce supervisors will be able to draw inspiration from an ever-expanding library of excellent customized playbooks.
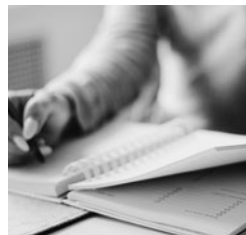
Adjust the playbooks to focus on less advanced intern tasks and activities

To ensure that supervisors have a realistic sense of intern capabilities and to make internships a successful experience for all potential interns, the playbooks should be calibrated to support an intern with no prior experience. Specifically, in the "mastery trajectory rubrics" that provide examples of internship tasks organized by experience level, we recommend adding a new set of examples that require no previous knowledge and removing the most advanced task from the rubric. The goal would be to provide scaffolding and support for learners with no prior experience – along with growth opportunities for students who are able to take the projects further.

Monitor the documentation process and its impact on YouthForce staff capacity

We recommend monitoring the impact of the new materials and process changes on applicants' and accepted participants' experience and on staff capacity. This way, YouthForce will know whether the positive effect of easing the documentation process for students is sustained over time and if the increased levels of staff support are overburdening their team. If the staff workload is too intensive, YouthForce can use targeted staff-facing materials to delegate responsibilities.

Develop an evaluation plan to assess the long-term impact of the program on career outcomes

We recommend continuing the program evaluation and working with an outside evaluator to answer long-term impact questions around the usefulness of the program and its impact on participants' career trajectories. We suggest tracking the participants' educational status, employment status, and wage rate in the years following their participation in the YouthForce program and comparing them against current trends in New Orleans.

Share the program model with stakeholders seeking to prepare New Orleans youth

We recommend that YouthForce consider disseminating their program model and sharing the playbooks templates with City stakeholders and other community partners that are also working to improve job prospects for the local youth.

ⓘ About this Initiative

The _____ is a program that aims to help nine participating cities identify, pilot, and measure the success of local strategies designed to accelerate economic mobility for their residents. Through the expertise of the What Works Cities' network of _____ and the support of Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Ballmer Group, this initiative puts data and evidence at the center of local government decision-making. The Initiative launched in April 2019, with an 18-month timeline, but was extended to 30 months as a result of COVID-19. In each city, a project was selected in collaboration with the city leaders that met the following five criteria: evidence base, mayoral priority, scalability, feasibility, and stewarding taxpayer resources.

Launched in 2015, _____ helps local governments use data and evidence to tackle their most pressing challenges and improve residents' lives. Learn more at _____.
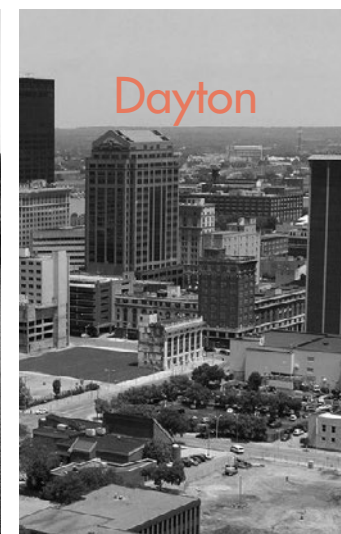
⚙ City Partners

This project was supported by two key partners: YouthForce NOLA and the City of New Orleans Office of Performance and Accountability (OPA).
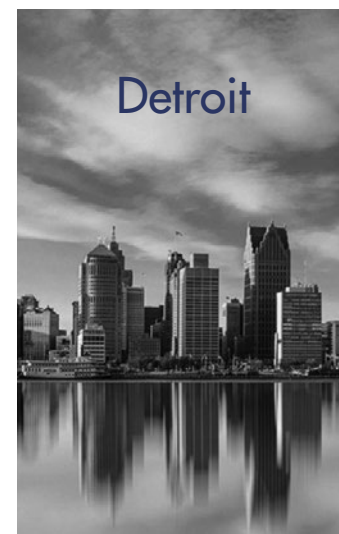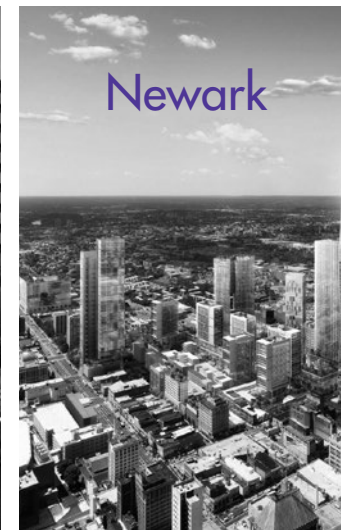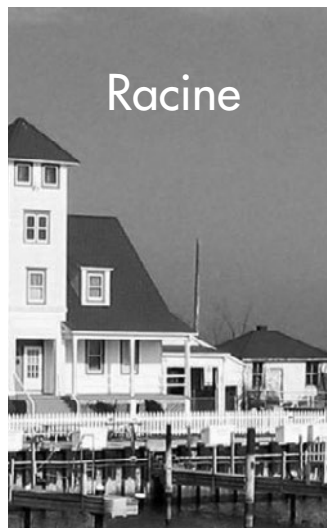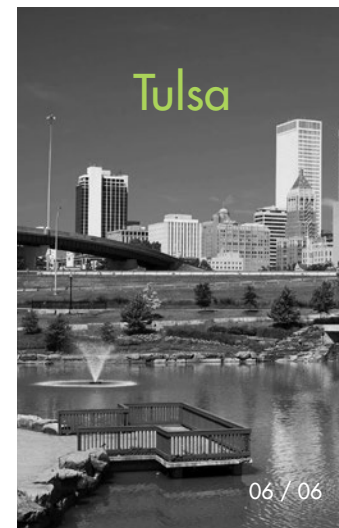
YouthForce NOLA
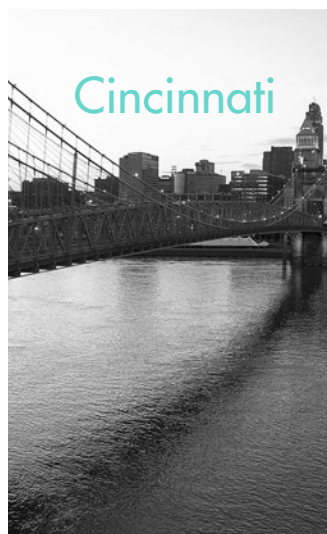
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