

INTRODUCTION

When considering the role of “mentor” in Western societies, one of the core functions of this type of supportive relationship has been the nurturing of young people’s interest in, and pursuit of, careers. Going all the way back to the apprentice and guild structures of centuries ago, there have always been adults who help youth learn not only the skills needed to perform jobs, but who also help build the “soft skills” they’ll need to succeed in the world of work. Mentors can also offer personal support and networking opportunities that help young workers thrive on a career path over time.

Our modern world has increasingly found value in the use of mentors to both help young people learn about and explore careers from an early age, as well as transition into workplace settings as they move from adolescence into young adulthood. One study by MENTOR found that as many as 5 million American adults mentor a youth or young adult as part of a workplace or career exploration program each year.¹ And there is growing recognition that the provision of mentors within workforce development and job training programs can be a powerful asset to early career workers and can boost job placement and retention outcomes. A recent study by MENTOR of mentoring relationships within workforce development settings for young adults found that almost 90% of these mentored young adults were retained in their jobs for over 90 days, a huge jump over historical retention averages. The same study found that 72% of participants felt their mentors helped them determine the next steps on their career or educational journey.²

Mentors are particularly impactful for marginalized young people, such as youth with disabilities,³ youth of color,⁴ and youth identifying as female,⁵ who are often underrepresented in certain industries, such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).⁶

An emphasis on career exploration and planning has increased in importance in the mentoring field in recent years, with one survey of the nation’s mentoring programs finding that 26% of all programs list career exploration and readiness as a top three outcome of their services. Of the organizations that offer mentoring services, 44% also offer dedicated job training and career planning support. But in spite of this surge to deploy mentors in service of youths’ careers, there is still much to be done to ensure that youth have the support they need to identify, prepare for, and persist on a career path.

MAJOR RESEARCH FINDINGS

As noted above, there is considerable research highlighting the role that mentoring programs and relationships can play in promoting career exploration and employment outcomes for youth.

- A prominent meta-analysis⁷ of career- and workforce-focused mentoring concluded that mentoring of those new to the workforce or early in their careers was associated with benefits related to compensation, promotion, fringe benefits, job satisfaction, job commitment and intent to stay in a job, overall career satisfaction, and career identity.
 - Studies of mentoring for high school students have found that mentors help youth apply classroom learning to real-world job settings and see the relevance of school to potential careers, while also facilitating more positive first-job experiences, compared to youth who were not mentored. These early workplace experiences were enhanced through mentor support of both “soft skills” (e.g., customer service values) and job-specific technical skills.^{8,9}
 - Research has shown particular benefits to marginalized youth in identifying with and pursuing careers in fields in which they are underrepresented. For example, a major review of mentoring programs for youth with disabilities¹⁰ found mentors effective in fostering career-related planning and preparation,
- knowledge of career options and transitions, and social skills and peer/coworker relations.
- Studies have demonstrated that mentors can be effective supports at the critical shift from career interest to actual career planning, with several noting that mentors can help solidify plans to pursue specific careers, feelings of self-efficacy about a career, and intentions to enroll in classes or formal training relevant to specific careers.^{11, 12, 13}
 - Research has also highlighted the many ways in which mentors can support youth in career exploration and early employment experiences around two major roles: providing social-emotional support and hands-on skill development.¹⁴ Other research has highlighted the importance of mentors as someone in whom youth can see their potential future self in the world of work, which is particularly important for youth of color and other underrepresented groups, who may not feel strong career identity and belonging without the example of a mentor.^{15, 16}
 - A recent research synthesis from the National Mentoring Resource Center concluded that both in-person and online mentoring programs can be effective in supporting career exploration and that these programs generally hold “promise in promoting outcomes relevant to supporting the career trajectories of youth, including orientation toward distinct career or

occupation paths, development of career interests, and improved self-efficacy within specific fields of interest.”¹⁷

REPRESENTATIVE PROGRAMS FROM THE FIELD

Below we highlight just a few of the program models that illustrate effective ways these services can be structured.

- **Year Up** - Year Up provides a year of training to prepare low-income young adults ages 18 to 24 for positions with good wages and career advancement opportunities in the information technology and financial operations fields. Youth receive an internship with a major corporate partner, as well as skill development classes, educational supports, and mentoring relationships. Evaluations of the model have found significant benefits to youth in terms of earnings and permanent job placements.^{18, 19}
- **Urban Alliance** - Urban Alliance serves youth facing risk through its high school internship program, which provides training, mentoring, and work experience to high school seniors from distressed communities. Participating youth receive a paid internship at a local business’s office, several weeks of hard and soft skill training, and mentoring relationships from staff and worksite mentors, as well as alumni services to support their transition into meaningful work.
- **General Motors Student Corps** - This innovative model is built around a team structure of 10 high school-age interns, three GM retirees, and one college student who embark on an ambitious journey over 10 weeks to brainstorm, plan for, and implement a service project that improves the youths’ community. These projects teach critical employment skills, such as managing budgets and timelines, managing multiple roles and tasks simultaneously, and effective communication and teamwork. The projects selected by youth also often involve specialized or technical skills, such as desktop publishing, design and engineering, or marketing.
- **YouthBuild** - This national, publicly funded model provides construction-related or other vocational training, educational services, counseling, and leadership-development opportunities to low-income young people ages 16 to 24 who did not complete high school. Evaluations of YouthBuild have found that the program increased the rate at which participants earned high school equivalency credentials, enrolled in college, and participated in vocational training, in addition to gains in wages and earnings 30 months out from the program.²⁰
- **EmployMilwaukee** - The youth programs of this workforce investment board provides opportunities for youth and young adults ages 16-24 to successfully transition into postsecondary education or a job on a career pathway. Program elements include education attainment, career exploration, paid work experience, dropout

prevention and recovery,
leadership development
opportunities, adult mentoring,
financial literacy, and
occupational skill training.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

There are several ways that we can further grow the use of mentors in services that support the career exploration, planning, and persistence of young people in America. Successful programs often involve partnerships between some combination of nonprofits, educational institutions, and private employers. Increased funding for these types of programs can help them address logistical challenges, such as transportation and the scheduling of workplace learning times, that can maximize outcomes.

Funding can also be used to train all adults in these spaces to take on mentoring roles so that youth are exposed to a web of supportive relationships and expanded career networking opportunities. The National Mentoring Project, a collaboration with several youth-focused organizations with the expressed goal of implementing workplace mentoring relationships for Opportunity Youth to retain employment, yielded very positive results: 88% of youth in positions were retained in their jobs, with 66% noting that their mentoring sessions were ‘very helpful’ towards long-term plans and goals.

In addition, it is important to begin career exploration programming in the elementary and middle school grades, long before young people are on the precipice of entering the world of work. Early career exploration, especially efforts to directly expose children to work environments and let them experience what certain careers are really like, can help build career identity from early ages. It can also offset the stereotypes and feelings of exclusion that prevent marginalized youth from considering certain career paths and bolster their academic performance by tying school success to career goals at younger ages. The Youth Workforce Readiness Act, which MENTOR supports, is built on these principles.

Finally, there is a need for more research on the best practices of career and workplace mentoring. The National Mentoring Research Center’s review of mentoring for career exploration noted that “most studies lack information on program implementation, such as the structure of mentor-mentee relationships, strength of relationship, or regularity of mentor/mentee meetings” and that generally the implementation fidelity, practices, and sustainability of these career mentoring programs have not been systematically reviewed or understood. Additional research can highlight effective program models that can be scaled beyond their current local settings.

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[mentoring.org](https://www.mentoring.org) | [#MentoringAmplifies](https://www.instagram.com/MentoringAmplifies)

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