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## Summer Youth Employment Programs 2020: Lessons from the Field

Mike Swigert | March 2021

**CLASP**  
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**This is part three of a three-part series written by CLASP and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions.** Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) offer short-term, paid opportunities for youth and young adults to gain career exposure, training, and work experience. These programs have been **shown** to improve participants' economic, academic, and behavioral outcomes. Drawing on our survey of 73 SYEP providers and local public funders, this series is designed to provide policymakers, local systems leaders, and practitioners with insight into how SYEPs responded in 2020 to the economic and health challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Part 3: Innovations and Promising Practices

SYEP program leaders and their partners – mayors and local officials, employers, workforce boards, local intermediaries, and community-based organizations – showed remarkable resilience in adapting to the challenges of 2020 to deliver meaningful experiences for young people. This brief highlights four promising practices that emerged.

## Virtual internships

Two-thirds of survey respondents (including 85 percent of those that met or exceeded enrollment targets) created or expanded virtual employer-hosted work experiences. Several programs developed consulting-style virtual internships in which participants collaborated on a project, such as a marketing plan, that they presented to their supervisor and colleagues. Virtual internships come with several benefits and limitations.

- Programs that added or expanded virtual employer-hosted work experiences were less likely to report struggling with youth engagement.
- Youth gained experience in remote work environments, which were increasingly common even prior to the pandemic.
- Transportation barriers didn't limit participation; however, technology barriers did.
- Some job functions simply can't be done remotely.
- Employers may require additional support to structure successful remote work placements.

Survey responses and interviews reveal several emerging principles for quality virtual internships:

- Provide technology and training on digital tools and how to work remotely.
- Structure frequent opportunities for youth to receive feedback from supervisors and program staff.
- Design projects that meet a business need and leverage youth participants' strengths and interests.
- Ensure that youth can develop meaningful relationships that expand their professional networks.

## Youth as community crisis responders

Some SYEPs engaged youth as designers of solutions to the overlapping crises of 2020. Forty-three percent of survey respondents created new work-based learning experiences connected to COVID response – virtually, in person, or both.

- Bay Area Community Resources in San Francisco created pandemic response internships for Latinx youth to deliver food and PPE and assist with testing and outreach.
- In Orlando, SYEP "Clean Team" participants helped neighborhood centers meet heightened CDC sanitation guidelines.
- One Summer Chicago's "Everyone Can Create" photography program gave youth with visual impairments the chance to create public service announcements on wearing masks, social distancing, and the unique ways that those with visual impairments experience social distancing.

## Increased college access

Local education leaders face the daunting task of helping students transition to postsecondary education after their junior and senior years of high school have been disrupted by COVID-19. Strong **evidence** shows that dual-enrollment programs are associated with positive postsecondary outcomes. Carefully designed earn-and-learn programs can connect postsecondary plans to career interests and ease the pressure on youth who need to earn money to meet basic needs in their households.

- Only 22 percent of survey respondents reported new or expanded partnerships with postsecondary institutions in 2020. However, one of the most popular opportunities among Boston youth was the earn-and-learn track in which older youth earned stipends by taking free remote college and career training courses at four local colleges.

## Efficiency through online engagement

Most survey respondents implemented online enrollment processes, including uploaded documents and digital signatures. Virtually all intend to continue streamlining online enrollment. In addition, some programs found that online platforms expanded their reach and improved employer engagement.

- In Michigan, the Flint & Genesee Chamber of Commerce hosted a virtual Summer Youth Internship Job Fair that used video interviews to match participants with in-person worksites. Employers preferred this to a centralized in-person job fair, and the Chamber may continue with this streamlined process.
- The flexibility of virtual programming allowed for a wider range of professionals to participate in career fairs, project presentations, and networking events. Youth benefited from exposure to multiple professions associated with a given employer and access to employers outside their geographical area.

## Policy and program considerations

Young people today are coming of age amid a once-in-a-lifetime crisis. Alongside year-round programs, postsecondary bridging, and other subsidized training and work experiences, SYEPs can contribute significantly to lifelong economic mobility for today's youth and an equitable national recovery. The following recommendations build on the innovations highlighted in this brief.

- Virtual experiences don't necessarily create economies of scale. Ensure stable funding and adequate resources for SYEP programs, whether virtual, in-person, or a hybrid of the two.
- Continue the spirit of innovation from 2020. Engage youth as design partners alongside employers to respond to changes in the economy and the challenges communities face.
- Deepen connections between summer work experiences and postsecondary planning and transition for both high school students and Opportunity Youth. Consider expanded partnerships with postsecondary institutions.
- Align communication and coordination of SYEPs with other youth initiatives and economic recovery plans.