



## Training Today's Youth for Tomorrow's Jobs

Dr. Burt S. Barnow was one of three speakers at the 34<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar on *Training Today's Youth for Tomorrow's Jobs*. He is an endowed chair of Public Service and Economics at The George Washington University and an affiliated scholar with both Abt Associates and Urban Institute. This issue brief summarizes his seminar presentation and briefing report chapter.

Dr. Barnow's Family Impact Seminar presentation video and briefing report chapter can be downloaded at [wisfamilyimpact.org/fis34](http://wisfamilyimpact.org/fis34).

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## Improving the Odds of Success: What Research Says About Youth Workforce Training

**What does it take for youth workforce training programs to succeed?** Policymakers can use research findings to guide decisions about how workforce training can improve the job prospects of youth and help ensure the success of the state economy. Based on 40 years of evaluation experience, Professor Barnow offers five supply-side strategies for increasing the odds that youth training programs will be an effective and efficient investment of taxpayer dollars. Helping disadvantaged youth has been challenging, but promising new approaches have emerged.

**(1) Employers are fully engaged.** Employers need to be part of the woodwork. Engaging employers is more than simply recruiting them for advisory boards. Employers can identify emerging occupations that meet the demand for jobs, now and in the future. Employers can help design curriculum, serve as instructors, and donate equipment to use in training. Employers can help ensure the success of trainings by providing paid on-site internships and apprenticeships, and by committing up-front to hire program graduates.

Employers play a major role in successful customized and sectoral training programs. Customized training serves a single firm to train existing or new workers to fill a specific job. Studies show offering customized training for a single employer is 10 to 16 times more effective for creating jobs than tax incentives.

Sector-based training meets the needs of a group of employers across multiple firms that hire people in the same occupation or industry. In a rigorous evaluation, customized training resulted in large employment and earnings gains. The benefits extended to young and old, men and women, Blacks and Latinos, welfare recipients, and ex-prisoners.

**(2) Trainees are connected with employers and employment.** Workforce training should include on-the-job experience. Work experience can be gained in apprenticeships, internships, job shadowing, and so forth.

**(3) Soft skills training is a key component.**

Occupational skills are not enough. Workers also need employability skills, sometimes referred to as soft skills. Soft skills include critical thinking, responsibility, self-management, and teamwork.

One successful program, Year Up, works with low-income 18- to 24-year-olds to train them for jobs in top companies in IT, investments, and quality assurance. Participants receive six months of hard skills training in their career track along with soft skills training in attendance, workplace behavior, and punctuality. Students then complete a six-month internship funded by the company. Performance requirements are tied to the training stipends, which are reduced if requirements are not met. In a rigorous evaluation, Year Up students had remarkable earnings gains compared to a control group.

**(4) Workforce training integrates basic remedial education and occupational training.** Research shows dropout rates are high when students are required to learn basic skills in reading, math, and science before they learn occupational skills. Instead, teaching basic academic and occupational skills at the same time is more effective. One successful model is Washington's I-BEST Program. Two instructors are placed in each classroom (at least half the time), one that teaches remedial skills and one that teaches occupational skills.

**(5) Support services are part of the program mix.** Even the best training programs can fail if they do not address the barriers disadvantaged youth face, whether social or emotional, family or financial. Services such as advising, tutoring, and mentoring, along with financial assistance for child care, transportation, or education costs can mean the difference between success and failure.

Successful workforce training programs can improve the odds that youth will enter careers that allow them to become self-sufficient and transition into a strong family life. It is difficult to put a price tag on strong families that raise the next generation of workers and citizens. ●