
Out-of-School Youth Order off a “Skillz Menu” to Acquire Basic Skills

Youth Council: Southeast Los Angeles County Workforce Investment Board (SELACO)

Elements: Career Preparation, Academic Excellence, Youth Leadership

Functions: Coordinating Youth Services, Measuring Quality and Impact of Local Efforts

Subjects: Serving Special Populations, Innovative Programs

The Challenge: Since 1995, the Southeast Los Angeles County Workforce Investment Board (SELACO-WIB) has run the Community Youth Corps (CYC), an employment and training program for out-of-school youth between the ages of 17-21. In 1997 and 2002 CYC received the nationally recognized Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) Award (see more here: (www.nyec.modernsignal.net/page.cfm?pageID=115)). Over the years, the program’s basic structure offered out-of-school youth an opportunity to receive minimum wage for work such as house painting, graffiti removal, community food distribution, and other community tasks for two-week periods, and then return to the classroom for two weeks to study for their GED and learn workjob readiness skills.

However, in 2002, with budget cuts and a virtually new staff, CYC realized that the program was attracting students who lacked employment/academic skills but who also lost interest in the skill-development component of the program after exhausting their work experience allocations. In an effort to retain out-of-school youth without using paid work experience as the primary motivator, and to ensure that all students exiting the program had the skills to obtain and maintain entry level employment, the CYC decided to redesign their program.

The Practice and the Evidence: CYC staff realized that their old marketing and program design did not reflect the types of employment training services that they offered, so they changed it to attract youth who would understand the need for skill development and personal growth. Recognizing that this population also needs to earn money during training, the CYC staff came up with a concept they called the “Skillz Menu”: an incentive-based program that ensures students earn money while completing a recognized training course or gaining certifications in various occupations. “It’s a creative self-help continuum that keeps students constantly engaged in learning activities that directly support positive WIA outcomes while also appealing to their interest: *money*,” explains Youth Services Manager, Valerie Lathern.

As of August 2004, the Skillz Café program was still in its assessment stage. It was implemented in May 2004 and the first group of youth was expected to complete ROP and other training programs that August. “These youth are excited,” Lathern reports. “Youth now better understand how to navigate the CYC program and are eager to use the menu. We merely reintegrate the

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message of Ed DeJesus, President of Youth Development and Research Fund, and tell our youth that these are their skill-learning years, not their money-earning years.” Participants clearly understand that the program goal is to make them marketable by equipping them with as many skills as possible.

Lathern feels that the program is particularly effective with out-of-school youth because it gives them the opportunity to “earn while they learn. We used to speak to them in work experience hours - now we speak to them in dollars. We deal with some interesting youth, some reformed drug dealers and single parents. This gives them a chance to learn a skill and keep some money in their pockets. The amount is up to them, and it gives them some autonomy. We say, ‘You’re here to make the choices and we’re here to guide you.’”

The Details: In a change from previous years, CYC makes their expectations very clear in the orientation: to assist youth in enhancing their income by acquiring as many skills as possible, which will result in their being marketable. “In the past, we tried to be the single stop for these youth. We still offer the full range of services, but we don’t try to provide everything ourselves. For example, for the GED, we partner with adult ed programs and Cerritos College. We leverage our resources,” Lathern explains.

While the youth are completing 30 hours of basic work-readiness workshops, they are given a “Skillz Menu” that lists tasks ranging from “Developing 10 Questions You’d Ask an Employer” an Appetizer that’s worth \$15, to “Obtaining a Full-Time Job” – a Main Course worth \$200. Youth then meet with their career development specialists and pick items from the menu - up to four each month - and establish the steps required to perform the identified tasks. The Skillz Menu was created to motivate students to select the “entrées” with the biggest incentives, like jobs, certifications, and college admission. “The idea is that they choose wisely based on a wide range of needs; some already have a GED while others aspire to better their math or reading skills,” Lathern explains. “The objective is to make learning fun.”

With little assistance from the CYC staff, youth must develop these skills independently and be prepared to demonstrate them at the monthly Skillz Challenge night, which brings them together to eat pizza, check out each other’s progress, and cheer each other on. One at a time, youth move between stations labeled Appetizer, Desserts, Beverages, etc. which are manned by various CYC staff, Youth Council members, employers, and former students. Participants state each item they have accomplished, describe it, demonstrate it, get their Skillz receipt stamped, and take it to the Cash Out window to receive their earnings. “Even the shyest youth participates. The others are very supportive whether a youth performs a skill for \$20 or one for \$180. One youth, a former gang member, took a few guys in the corner and showed them how to tie a tie. Those guys will never forget that they learned to tie a tie in the hallway at CYC and got paid for it,” Lathern recalls. Students leave the monthly challenges with earnings between \$25-\$180 in cash.

Unbeknownst to CYC participants, each has a total of 250-300 work experience hours (\$2,025) available after completing any recognized training program. They are allowed to spend 100

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hours (\$697) of their work experience hours in the Skillz Menu. The Skillz Menu was crafted so that if a participant “orders” wisely off the menu and gets a job placement, the WIB will never have to spend his or her work experience dollars.

The program represents a full-time commitment for the four dedicated CYC staff members. Lathern recommends that anyone interested in replicating such a program begin with their budget. “Assess how effectively your work experience dollars are being utilized by your youth. Are you getting the maximum skills for the amount you are investing? If you feel you could get more bang for your buck, creatively craft a menu that supports your desired outcomes.” Lathern credits Ed Dejesus’ emphasis on keeping services “real” for youth, and believes that youth need to be dealt with realistically.

Breakthrough Moment: The Skillz Café made sense to the staff right from the orientation and they felt more comfortable marketing the program. “People used to call asking if we had jobs, and now the callers are more interested in developing skills,” says Lathern. “We keep it real, but we put the burden on the youth. We tell them what we offer, and it is up to them. This new program design also aligns with the staff personalities and the CYC mission.” She describes the networking that takes place at the Skillz Café each month as “incredible.”

What’s Next for this YCidea? CYC will continue to assess the Skillz Menu’s growth and success. They would like to develop a menu that makes it easier to follow up on students who have exited the program. This is a challenge since at-risk youth are so mobile. The CYC Staff is working on a menu with services tailored to youth out in the job market. It will be integrated into the existing Skillz Challenge Night, but its incentives will primarily be donated items such as movie tickets, sporting events, pre-paid cell phones, and other community donations.

Where to Go for More Information

Southeast Los Angeles County Workforce Investment Board

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Tool

[Community Youth Corps Skillz Menu](#)

(<http://www.nww.org/yci/fallreporterdocs/SkillZMenu.pdf>)