

REIMAGINING PATHWAYS TO STUDENT SUCCESS: PENCIL'S OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A THREE-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

BRIEF #1: INCREASING ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY THROUGH NEW YOUTH EMPLOYMENT MODELS

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Over the past two years, youth serving non-profit organizations in the education and workforce development fields have needed to rapidly innovate, create, and adapt in the unstable and uncertain environment of the pandemic. Like our peer organizations, PENCIL shifted to virtual service delivery, developed new models, and refined programs to offer young people what they needed most during this unique and historic moment.

PENCIL also embraced this time to learn from our work and understand the specific program elements that drive desired outcomes in our efforts to “connect students to success.” With support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, PENCIL conducted a three-year retrospective evaluation to understand what is working, what could be better, and what we can share to strengthen the field’s efforts overall. The result of that work is captured in a series of three briefs, each exploring a unique, data-driven hypothesis for one of the pillars of PENCIL’s Theory of Change. PENCIL’s Theory of Change asserts that to be “connected to success” a young person needs Developmental Relationships, Skill Attainment, and Access to Opportunity. Specifically, the briefs will explore the following topics:

- The difference between Career Explorers and all other PENCIL programs in its ability to increase students’ access to opportunity and sense of belonging. Notable trends were observed for high school students and first-generation college bound students.
- The difference between virtual and in person service delivery on building mentorship relationships for students especially for different age groups.
- The difference between school-year and summer program models on our measures of skill attainment and the potential for more developmentally scaffolded year-round approaches.

Students participating in PENCIL programs are asked to complete pre and post surveys. These surveys include 18 questions across three indices designed to measure PENCIL’s three “Keys to Success.” Factor analysis conducted on all asset questions and individual indices found indices to be internally consistent and unique (TLI =0.95, RMSEA =0.047). MANOVA was conducted on Z-scores created from individual indices. Post hoc analysis was conducted on programmatic and demographic variables showing statistically significant (CI > 95%) intergroup differences as well as the interaction effects between two demographic variables. Dependent variables included year, program, virtual/in-person, grade, self-reported race/ethnicity, gender, age, English spoken at home, and parental education. Post hoc tests were not conducted due to data limitations. Preliminary post hoc analysis focused on population subgroups show trends based on available data and do not meet the sample size requirements for statistical significance. Data was collected and reviewed across four program offerings:

The PENCIL School Partnership Program (In Person)

PENCIL creates and supports ongoing relationships between business partners, schools, and students to prepare students for college and career success. PENCIL staff coordinate and guide monthly sessions that are supported by business partner volunteer teams. Programming increases student access to relationships, skills, and opportunities unique to the business sector. Sessions range from workshops on networking and professional communication, to panels with corporate volunteers introducing students to career options within a company. In person program data was collected during the 2018-19 school year (n=277).

The PENCIL School Partnership Program (Virtual)

Virtual School Partnership Programs offered the same content and structure as the above but adapted for online delivery. Virtual program data was collected during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years (n=217).

PENCIL Internship Program

Each year, PENCIL places hundreds of students (ages 16-22) in paid six-week summer internships at companies across New York City. Students are required to attend 20 hours of pre-employment training facilitated by PENCIL staff and corporate volunteers to learn essential career-readiness skills including financial literacy, office technology, networking, and personal branding, interview best practices, and workplace etiquette. PENCIL matches students to interviews for available summer positions businesses recruited from a variety of industries. Final hiring decisions are made by employer partners. Internship data was collected from students in virtual and in-person internships during the summers of 2020 and 2021 (n=68).

PENCIL Career Explorers

In response to the impact of COVID-19 on the availability of internships, PENCIL designed and launched Career Explorers. The program offers high school students a paid work-based learning experience designed to promote career awareness, exploration, and preparation. All program components have been delivered virtually. Career Explorers attend the internship program’s pre-employment training facilitated by PENCIL staff and corporate volunteers and then engage in 150 hours of paid work-based learning during the summer. They complete an industry-specific project related to their career interest and are paired with a volunteer mentor from that industry who provides guidance and feedback as well as networking and career exposure. PENCIL staff provide daily supervision to ensure participants remain focused and meet all deadlines and deliverables. Career Explorer data was collected from students during the summers of 2020 and 2021 (n=67).

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In the distribution of this series, PENCIL hopes to contribute to and advance the conversations around what it will truly take to harness this moment in time and prepare young people for successful pathways in their academic and career pursuits. New York City is hungry for an economic renaissance as the effects of the pandemic stabilize. Part of that equation must be an understanding that when we connect students to success, we connect the city to success. It is in our collective best interest to learn from the past two years and reemerge with, not the same old programs and opportunities for young people, but better ones that sustain and scale the successful innovations born of this moment.

BRIEF #1: INCREASING ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY THROUGH NEW YOUTH EMPLOYMENT MODELS

Though opportunities exist for NYC’s young people to explore careers and the multitude of pathways possible for success, many students do not have sufficient access to them.^{i,ii} Inequitable access to work-based learning opportunities limits the mobility of young adults and prevents many from participating in the economic growth of their community.ⁱⁱⁱ Access to opportunities that engage students in enriching experiences and cultivate social capital^{iv} is vital if we are going to reimagine the experience for all NYC students to include meaningful career pathways. Research has shown cultural and social capital increase students’ cultural awareness and sense of belonging^v and PENCIL believes these are foundational building blocks to career pursuit and persistence.

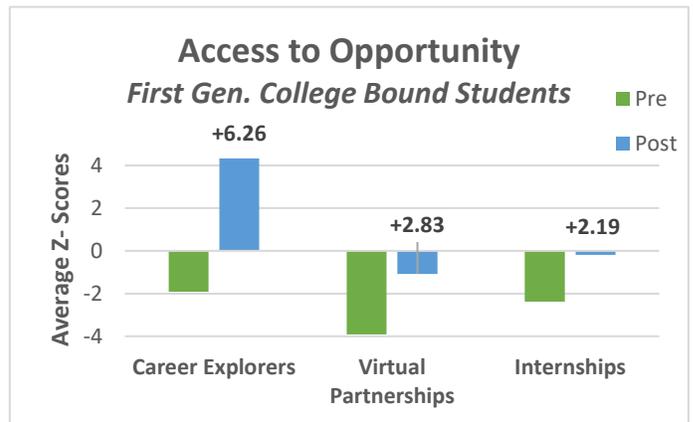
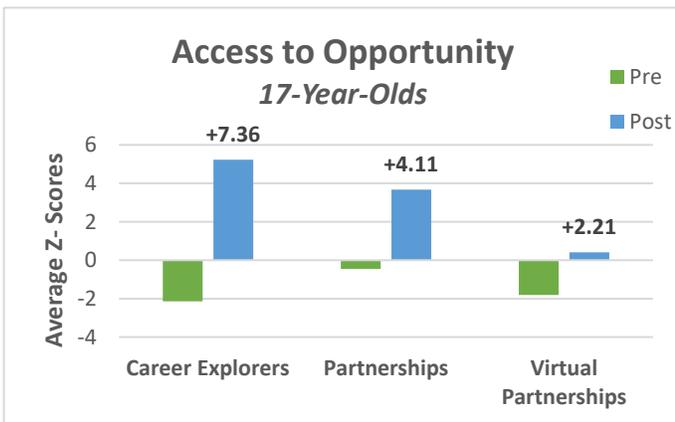
For over 25 years, PENCIL has connected students to opportunities that advance college and career readiness as well as expose them to a variety of successful post-secondary pathways. PENCIL helps students access people, knowledge and experiences within the business environment that were previously inaccessible by working with partners to understand and overcome the social norms, practices, and expectations that exclude students from enriching spaces, places, and events.

Internships are often successful points of entry that increase access to opportunity, enhance career exposure, and build a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, such opportunities are not equally distributed. High school students are consistently overlooked by employers who control hiring into traditional internship positions. Of the 2,177 high school students that applied for internships with PENCIL in 2021, only 90 were selected by employer partners in the hiring process. Employers often cite lack of industry experience as the rationale for selecting other candidates.

Given the long-term impact connected to access to opportunity it is imperative the education and workforce development fields find opportunities to scale models, other than, and alongside traditional internships, that support strong outcomes in this domain.

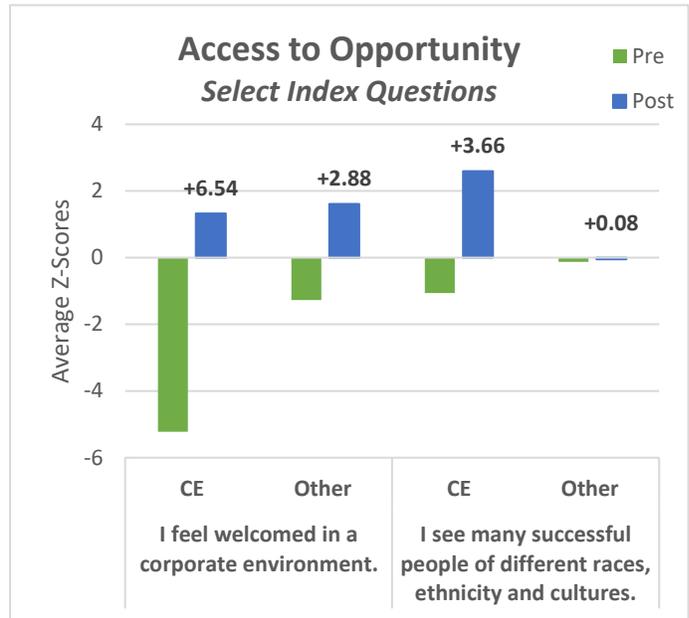
Findings

In a three-year retrospective analysis of PENCIL’s program models, one program emerged with consistently greater gains related to access to opportunity. Career Explorers outperformed PENCIL Partnership Program students (both those in person and virtually) as well as “traditional” internships across all three years of the study. Additionally, Career Explorers points to greater gains in this outcomes area for nearly every demographic group evaluated, particularly 17-year-old high school students and first-generation college bound students.



The results for 17-year-olds and first-generation college bound students currently point to trends in the data, not yet clear statistically significant differences. Nevertheless, given the program realities PENCIL has observed, we believe these trends merit further exploration. Additionally of note, 17-year-olds in internships are not included in the data due to the extremely low sample size.

What we can statistically observe related to this index is that some drivers of this enhanced impact seem to be related to the extent to which participants felt welcome in a corporate environment as well as the visibility of ethnic, racial and gender diversity among successful people students meet through the Career Explorers program. This data couples with the program implementation reality to create a compelling case for expansions of such models.



Program Reality

Given the statistical success and promising trends for Career Explorers, it is important to understand what elements of the program may be contributing to this success so they may be replicated across not only PENCIL’s portfolio, but the broader field as well. The multifaceted structure of Career Explorers allows students to gain deep insight into an industry, make many professional connections, and get genuine support and encouragement from someone with expertise in their industry of focus:

Meaningful Industry Exposure - The youngest Career Explorer students are typically 17 and, having just completed their Sophomore or Junior year of high school, likely to not have had previous access to internships. For most, Career Explorers is their first opportunity to enter a professional environment and have access to the associated tools, skills, and responsibilities. In lieu of tasks associated with a traditional internship, Career Explorers are asked to complete a capstone project designed collaboratively with their mentor, leveraging both their interests and the mentor’s experience. While traditional internships may offer a limited introduction to the field and tasks are often administrative in nature, Career Explorers delve deep and do meaningful work that mirrors what might be asked of them as professionals in a given field. For example, Career Explorers have developed their own investment portfolios, conducted community assessments, and structured real estate development pitches. Mentors provide a high level of guidance throughout, introducing new concepts and providing students with support as they learn new skills. This supported, rigorous environment may be creating conditions to build students’ confidence in an industry and contribute to positive feelings about their chances to succeed in a corporate environment.

Social Capital - As opposed to partnership and internship programming, where students work exclusively with individuals from a single company, Career Explorers work in industry-aligned cohorts that connect students to diverse professionals from a range of companies in their industry of choice. In weekly facilitated sessions, students learn about a range of businesses and roles within a single career field. Further, cohorts are small, and students have multiple touchpoints with all the mentors in a cohort, encouraging them to form meaningful connections with multiple adults and not just their individual mentor. One of the indicators that support enhanced access to opportunity is when a student sees and engages with leaders of many races, ethnicities, and genders in the setting they are in. Career Explorers’ structure may help students see and experience a wider range of connections as compared to other program models.

Access & Encouragement from Mentors - The weekly check-ins Career Explorers have with mentors provide an opportunity for students to get encouragement and constructive feedback on their capstone projects. These conversations help students fully appreciate how their strengths and interests are an asset in the field they are hoping to pursue. The trust-based relationship between mentor and mentee offers students the opportunity to explore the industry without judgement. In these conversations, students can consider if the work truly aligns with their interests, discuss their place within a larger field, and develop a sense of connection and familiarity with a particular business or industry. When students are encouraged to see and pursue the possibilities for their futures, they are more likely to demonstrate an increase in the access to opportunity index. The relationship with their mentor and ongoing conversations about their future create a sense of connection and belonging that is often stronger among the Career Explorers as compared to students in the partnership and internship programs.

Recommendations

While created in crisis, Career Explorers offers a strategy, beyond the pandemic, to prepare NYC high school students more equitably with the skills and experiences they need to break into cutting-edge careers. The results of PENCIL's evaluation demonstrate the potential of this model to enhance young people's access to opportunities and their sense of belonging within the spaces and places those opportunities play out. The latter point being supremely important to ensure young people experiencing barriers to such experiences are included and embraced. As NYC redefines itself after the most critical impacts of the pandemic seem to have stabilized, it is clear career pathways for youth will play a major role in the city's immediate and long-term success. Most importantly, for all students to have equitable access to the careers they dream of, it is imperative for the city and the city's youth employment providers to develop creative solutions, not only through expanded supply of jobs, but also with supports and program elements that precipitate long-term success for all. To that end, following are several recommendations for the field as well as PENCIL's own program enhancement.

Understand Career Explorers as a viable model to complete the Summer Youth Employment landscape, especially for high school students. From PENCIL's experiences, it is clear younger students seeking summer employment greatly benefit from a paid work-based learning experience that offers them unique entrée, mentorship, and technical knowledge in a highly supportive, low risk environment. Considering Career Explorers, and similar simulated internship models, as a first step in paid career-facing summer employment can help build high school students' confidence about, awareness of, and comfort in an industry they may pursue. Such models will better prepare students for future employment and instill attitudes of persistence as they enter challenging occupational fields. Especially as summer employment in NYC is poised for unprecedented growth, these models also have the ability to exponentially increase the pool of available jobs. Furthermore, as an offering exclusively for rising high school juniors and seniors, this type of model can be the start of a clearer arc of career pathways to best prepare youth for success.

Enhance all Summer Youth Employment programs with industry mentors that represent a variety of fields and companies. The quality of an individual young person's summer employment experience often depends on the adults they engage with as mentors, supervisors, role model, etc. Depending on the job, the people surrounding a student or intern may or may not represent the parts of an industry a young person is most interested in and, as a result, an opportunity to truly ignite a spark might be missed. What if we could saturate youth employment experiences with more mentors, role models, and experts representing a near 360-degree view of a given field? Through shared infrastructure of employer/corporate partner engagement, it may be possible to offer young people in any NYC summer employment program access and facilitated connections to thousands of diverse professionals who mentor and model infinite paths to success. Access to such a pool of people can increase the chances for young people to see themselves represented in a field they are interested in and therefore increase the likelihood they will pursue that field.

Encourage all summer employment work to be as embedded as possible in technical aspects of a field. As indicated above, the kinds of projects Career Explorers work on often traverse the “typical” scope of work an intern might be responsible for during summer employment. In such experiences, with the help of their industry mentor, young people can gain insight into elements of an industry that are more holistically representative of the kind of work they might do if they pursue that field. Furthermore, in simulated experiences, young people are free to experiment, make mistakes, and get creative, which can add to their comfort with the work. While many internships and summer employment opportunities might be limited in their ability to fully offer this level of access into technical work, it is possible to add more substantial capstone or reflection assignments to a summer employment experience where interns aggregate their observations and learnings from the summer and present them as part of a set of tangible recommendations that a company or department might pursue. This added element can foster a deeper appreciation for the industry and offer an opportunity to assert early agency as a developing leader in that industry.

Increase touchpoints between students and mentors in school-based work-based learning programs. One of PENCIL’s observations related to Career Explorers is the impact regular career encouragement from mentors has on students’ comfort and confidence. Bolstering this element in PENCIL’s other school-based programs could increase the extent to which students feel they are encouraged and supported to pursue their passions. Many times, school-based career readiness models focus on skill building and information sharing to increase exposure to an industry. Installing a more frequent feedback loop between mentors and students where students process their aspirations alongside the skills and information obtained through program sessions could lead to outsized impact in the domain of access to opportunity.

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As NYC approaches the summer of 2022, PENCIL will continue to evaluate the hypotheses and recommendations in this brief. With the Summer Youth Employment Program set for unprecedented growth, PENCIL looks forward to working with and learning from the many partners in the city working to enhance access to opportunity for all youth. We encourage the sharing of data, observations, and models to achieve that end and are happy to widely collaborate.

To discuss opportunities for partnership, please contact [Jessica Bynoe](#), PENCIL’s VP & Chief Strategy Officer. For information on PENCIL’s evaluation methodology and research, please contact [Keith A. Howey](#), PENCIL’s Director of Impact & Operations. For details on our program implementation, please contact [Devaughn D. Fowlkes](#), PENCIL’s Associate Director of Programs or [Katje Lilah King](#), PENCIL’s Senior Program Officer.

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^v Coleman, James (1990). *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.