Scaling Up to Close the Opportunity Divide for Low-Income Youth: A Case Study of the Year Up Program

PACE
Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education

Scaling Up to Close the Opportunity Divide for Low-Income Youth: A Case Study of the Year Up Program

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Executive Summary

Millions of low-income youth in the U.S. lack opportunities to acquire skills needed for well-paying jobs. Meanwhile, forecasted shortages of college graduates worry many employers in rapidly growing sectors of the economy. Practitioners have developed promising training programs to bridge this divide, but these programs have been small relative to the needs. For these reasons, identifying and scaling exemplary programs are central objectives in the nation's workforce policy and research agenda.

This report examines initial efforts to scale one promising program: Year Up, operated by a non-profit organization with the same name. From its inception in 2000, Year Up expanded its original "core" model—a stand-alone program—from one office in Boston to sites in nine cities serving 2,000 youth annually by 2015. In 2012, Year Up began piloting an adaptation for community college settings designed to improve scalability: the Professional Training Corps (PTC). By 2016, PTC pilots were serving 500 young adults at seven colleges, with additional sites in the pipeline. Year Up also was expanding efforts to apply its experience to strengthen wider workforce systems.

Analyses in this report concentrate on experiences in scaling Year Up's core program. They draw from interviews and materials on program implementation collected as part of an ongoing, federally-sponsored evaluation: Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE). PACE is using a random assignment design to measure the impacts of Year Up and eight other career pathways programs. Future reports will publish impact findings from the evaluation.

Year Up's core program targets motivated young adults aged 18–24 from low-income backgrounds who have a high school diploma or GED. In the first six months, it immerses participants in full-time learning communities providing training in high-demand fields such as IT and finance while reinforcing attitudes, communication skills, and habits needed to succeed at work. In the second six months, participants take internships to further work-based learning and build career networks and relationships with future employers. Employer contributions in exchange for Year Up interns support about three-fifths of the program's $27,100 per participant cost.

Program data show that Year Up maintained a high level of performance while expanding services from 2010-15. During this period, the program's completion rate increased from 70 to nearly 80 percent, while the number of participants roughly doubled. Similarly, Year Up succeeded in increasing recruitment by 50 percent to generate the PACE control group sample in 2013–14 while maintaining applicant quality.

Drawing mainly on interviews with Year Up leaders in 2014–15, this paper distills lessons from three aspects of experiences with growth: expanding recruitment, scaling signature program services, and addressing cross-cutting challenges in scaling.

To expand recruitment, Year Up used resources from PACE to hire a marketing firm and test new approaches to marketing. The firm's analyses showed that online job boards can be cost-effective ways to reach the target population. Initial efforts to market through online social media were not as productive, notwithstanding young adults' immersion in these technologies. Another finding was that intensified marketing was not enough: it took a substantial effort by local staff to sustain interest and engagement through Year Up's intensive, multi-step screening process. The experience points to the potential benefits of reformulating screening to increase efficiency by creating higher-yield pipelines (for example, to adult high school completers and borderline college applicants) and simplifying screening approaches.

Successful scaling required varying degrees of adaptation to core program services. The response to growth for some services (e.g., curriculum and instruction) involved strengthening national standards and monitoring to promote consistency across locations. For other components, adaptation involved more substantive changes. To engage employers in increasing internship slots, for example, Year Up shifted from a primary emphasis on corporate social responsibility to embrace a "customer solutions" strategy. The customer solutions approach involves identifying critical skills shortages facing companies and creating pathways to jobs at these firms for suitably-skilled young adults.

Some services required little modification to support expansion. For example, Year Up's learning communities provide flexibility to mobilize additional supports for participants from staff and peers in localities with greater needs. Calibrating to a common learning community size also helps to set numeric goals for expanding recruitment and internship slots and standardize requirements for adding staffing, space and other resources.

Finally, Year Up offers insights into promising cross-cutting responses to challenges many programs face in scaling up. One such challenge is a tendency towards over-compartmentalization and narrowing of perceived responsibilities that can accompany increases in the number of specialized staff. Year Up has addressed this challenge in part by implementing strong performance measurement systems and by encouraging shared responsibility for outcomes. It also has fostered a culture of continuous improvement by emphasizing "strive to learn" as a central value and by supporting learning through a variety of knowledge-building and feedback mechanisms.

Also salient among cross-cutting strategies is Year Up's extensive application of models and tools from the business world. The organization is testing a variety of for-profit models in developing financially sustainable pathways for growth. Funding from philanthropy and government innovation programs provides resources for investing in self-financing approaches—including models sustained by revenue from employers, federal student aid, in-kind resources from college partners, and "pay for success" approaches. In hiring local Executive Directors, Year Up looks for candidates with strong private sector experience growing businesses of similar size. Many other business concepts and practices permeate daily operations.

Year Up's experience attests to the progress a strong learning organization can make when it pushes its programs to the limit, continuously assesses its performance, and is willing to act on the results. The most interesting chapters of the Year Up story lie ahead, with a number of promising initiatives underway and independent evaluations poised to provide solid evidence on best practices and impacts.

1.   Introduction

Many innovative U.S. workforce programs embody promising strategies for equipping low-income youth with skills needed for well-paying jobs. Collectively, they are operating on a small scale relative to the numbers of adults who are under-skilled and projected shortages of college-educated workers facing U.S. employers, however. Sometimes described as "boutique programs," these innovative models tend to be designed for specific circumstances, expensive to operate, and difficult to replicate and scale.

There is great interest in scaling such programs. Philanthropic, government, non-profit, and research organizations have produced a substantial literature on principles, approaches, and tools.[1] Demonstration projects have sought to identify effective approaches to scaling.[2] Demonstrations to date have involved only a limited range of approaches, however. Additional case studies covering a wider range of programs and settings are needed.

This report assesses experience scaling up Year Up, one of the nation's most promising workforce programs for young adults. Operated by a non-profit organization of the same name, the Year Up case study is compelling for the variety of practical lessons and noteworthy organizational traits that have emerged.

About Year Up

Year Up is a one-year program for low-income young adults (age 18–24) with a high school diploma or GED. The program provides six months of customized training and supports followed by six-month internships with companies in information technology, financial operations, and other growing fields. The internships represent an unusual level of engagement in youth employment and training by major U.S. firms, who contribute substantial funds to the program, as well as valuable work experience to participants.

> **Ongoing Evaluation of Year Up**
>
> Year Up is one of nine promising career pathways programs being evaluated in the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) project, sponsored by the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and conducted by Abt Associates.
>
> Interviews with Year Up leaders used for this report were one source of program implementation data collected for PACE, which also includes random assignment evaluation of the Year Up core program's impacts.
>
> A PACE report on Year Up's short-term impacts on earnings and other outcomes is scheduled for release in fall 2017. A follow-on ACF project, the Career Pathways Intermediate Outcomes Study (CPIO), will provide impact analyses for a longer (36-month) follow-up period.
>
> More information on PACE and CPIO are available at: http://www.career-pathways.org/acf-sponsored-studies/.

Year Up has embraced an ambitious three-pronged approach to scaling. The first prong is its independent "core" program model. Beginning in Boston in 2000, the core program grew steadily: by 2015, it was serving 2,000 young adults annually in nine cities. Launched in 2011, the second prong is the Professional Training Corps (PTC) model. PTC adapts the core model to operate on college campuses, using college instructors, facilities and other services to reduce costs and improve scalability. PTC programs served 500 participants in seven cities in 2015.

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[1]   For example, see Bloom & Chatterji (2009); Bradach & Grindle (2014); Clark et al. (2012); Estrada (2010); Fixsen et al. (2013); and Granger (2011).

[2]   Examples include Boller et al. (2014); Endel et al. (2011); Quint et al. (2011); and Visher et al. (2010).

The third prong consists of efforts to leverage Year Up's experience providing direct services to influence change more widely. This influence agenda aims to build large-scale hiring pipelines for "opportunity youth" and expand supportive systems for advancing subsequent career training at community colleges.

About This Report

This report focuses on experience with growth in the Year Up core program, as described by program leaders in a round of 2014–15 interviews. This was an important period in the organization's history, when leaders were actively processing lessons from experience to date and developing ambitious plans for growth ahead.

Sections 2 and 3 set the stage with a brief description of the core program model and a statistical analysis of growth. Section 4 draws lessons from experience with growth in Year Up's core program. Section 5 describes Year Up's emerging three-pronged strategy for scaling, building on lessons from the core program experience. Section 6 provides a brief conclusion.

2. Year Up Core Program Model

Year Up's logic model embodies the theory that low-income adults need intensive and comprehensive services to move onto solid career pathways. In the core program, Year Up staff members provide a full range of services from stand-alone offices in major urban areas.[3] Training originally focused on one of two occupational tracks (information technology and financial operations) but has expanded in recent years to other fields (including computer programming, digital advertising, cyber security, and business management).

2.1 Recruiting and Screening Students

Each local Year Up office enrolls students twice a year—normally in January and July. Admissions units recruit and screen participants in Year Up's target group: motivated young adults from low-income communities who are aged 18–24, have a high school diploma or GED, and face life challenges that are manageable with help from the program.

The intensity of Year Up's multistage screening process reflects both the importance attached to identifying youth able to benefit from the program and the dispersion of youth throughout large urban areas. Initial outreach encourages potential applicants to register their interest online and to attend a Year Up open house. The program then assesses fit through tasks structured to demonstrate critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and other psycho-social attributes and through information gathered in a formal application and in-person interviews. Admissions teams use this information to rate each applicant on a common set of cognitive and noncognitive skills, and they complete a risk profile tallying assessed personal and family challenges. The teams then meet to review results for each applicant and make an admission decision. Historically, admissions teams have had to engage and screen about four applicants for each participant enrolled.[4]

2.2 Components of the Core Model

Year Up structures its program activities for learning communities of 40 students. These cohorts attend classes and participate in other program activities together.

Learning and Development Phase

Formal instruction during a six-month "Learning and Development" (L&D) phase consists of customized courses in professional skills (business culture and etiquette), business communication (written and spoken), and technical skills (based on the occupational tracks offered at each site). Instruction is highly contextualized and emphasizes active, project-based learning. Students earn credits for completing Year Up courses through partnerships with local community colleges.

Students receive substantial social supports and services—from one another, advisors, and staff social workers. They also receive a weekly stipend averaging about $150. In return, they must adhere to a

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[3] For a more detailed summary of the Year Up core program, see
http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/pace-career-pathways-program-profile-year-up.

[4] More recently, the ratio has been closer to 5:1, as seen in Exhibit 3.

strictly enforced contract, covering timeliness and attendance, classroom activities and homework completion, professional dress and hygiene, and respectful behavior. In weekly "Friday Feedback" sessions, students and staff follow guidelines for constructive exchange to give one another feedback on events of the week.

Internship Phase

In the program's second phase, students take full-time internships with major companies—typically leading technology and financial firms. They receive a somewhat higher weekly stipend (averaging about $225) and attend a weekly meeting back at Year Up's offices. Program staff actively monitor students' internship experiences through periodic surveys and ongoing communication with students and their supervisors. Toward the end of the internship period, the program provides job transition and placement services.

An unusual aspect of the internship program is that employers contribute funds to Year Up for each intern. This funding source is an essential aspect of the program's financial model: employer contributions covered 62 percent of the program's average cost of $27,100 per student in 2015.

Alumni services staff provide intensive follow-on monitoring and supports for four months after students graduate, with the goal of ensuring positive outcomes for most graduates. The program seeks to keep alumni engaged beyond this period through local alumni associations, periodic events, and opportunities to "give back" to current students.

3. Experience with Growth in the Core Program through 2015

Year Up's core program grew rapidly from its start in one city (Boston) in 2000. By 2015, it had expanded to nine cities (including two locations in the San Francisco Bay area), served about 1,000 students per enrollment period (about 2,000 students annually), and was still growing (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1.   Number of Youth Starting the Year Up Core Program: 2001–2015
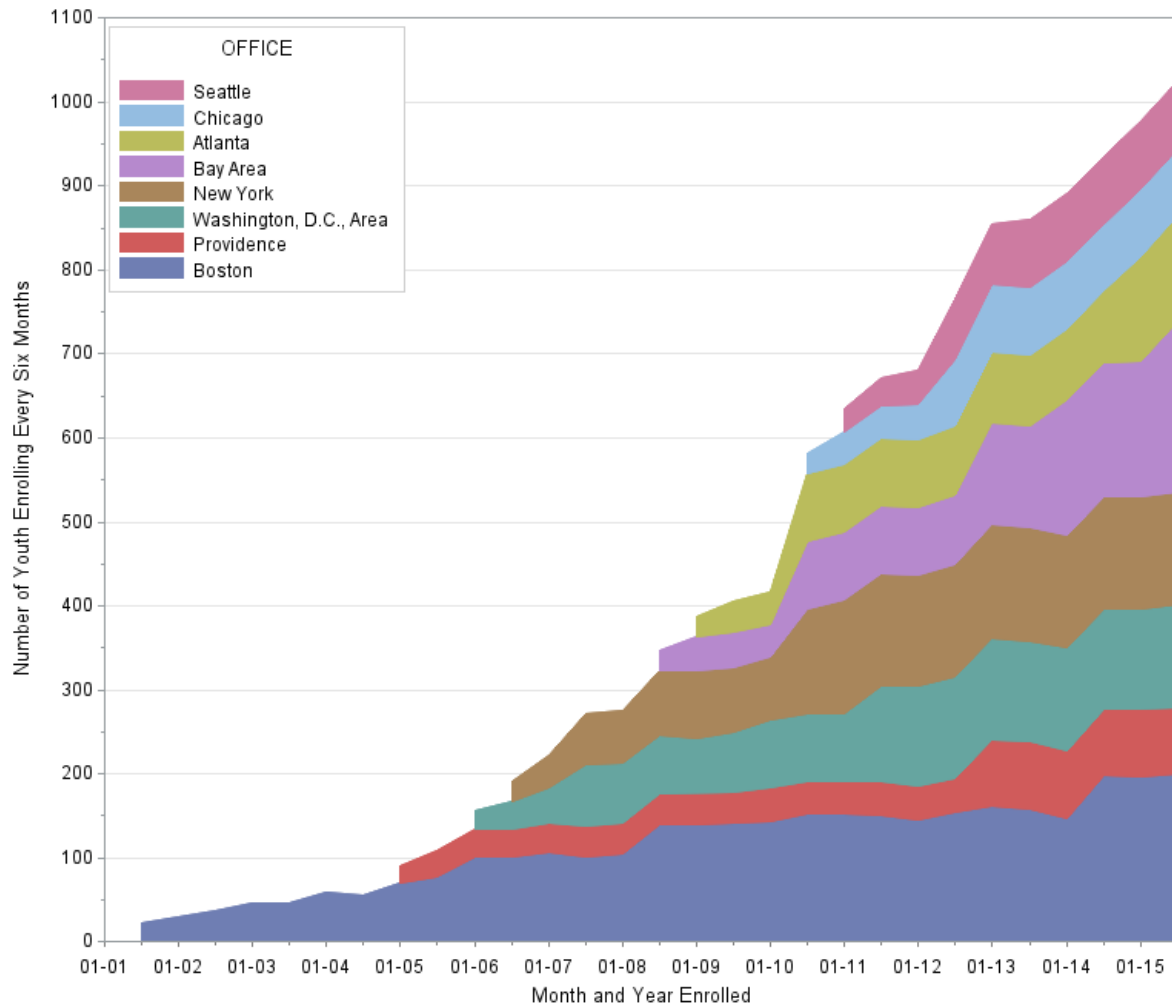
Source: Aggregate historical data from Year Up.

Year Up achieved this growth without compromising program quality. To the contrary, as Exhibit 2 shows, the percentage of students who completed the program climbed from 70 to 80 percent from 2010–2014. The proportion of Year Up completers with positive employment outcomes four months after graduation rose from the lower to upper 80s. Time series regression analyses (not shown in the exhibit) confirm that periods of local growth in enrollment did not influence these outcome trends.[5]

Exhibit 2.   Trends in Selected Outcomes for the Year Up Core Program: 2010–2014
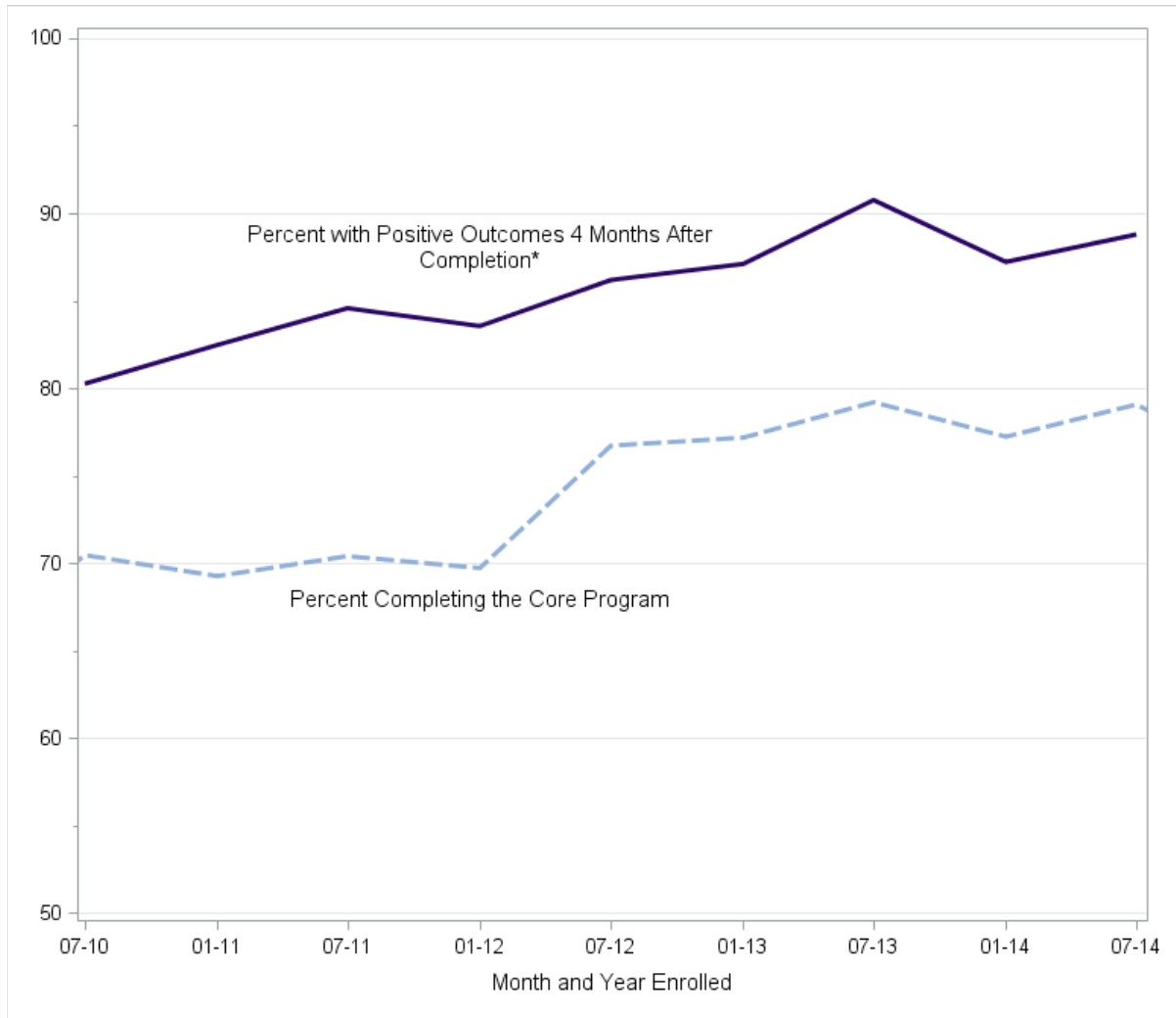
Source: Abt Associates calculations from Year Up micro-data extracts.

*Following Year Up performance measures in effect during this period, "positive outcomes" are measured for program completers and include either employment (full-time or part-time) or full-time college enrollment. The latter can contribute no more than 10 percentage points to the measure if employment is below 75 percent.

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5   The models controlled for fixed office characteristics and common time period effects across offices to isolate growth effects.

As documented later in this report, Year Up's leaders decided that the core program's reliance on philanthropy for a portion of per-participant costs eventually would limit its scale. Thus, in 2015 they decided to maintain, but not increase, the number of core sites. Instead, expansion efforts would focus on a new, community college–based model—the Professional Training Corps (PTC)—designed to reduce reliance on philanthropy (see Section 5).

This decision was rooted in a significant expansion in Year Up's mission. Recognizing the limits on what one organization could do directly, the evolving mission increasingly has emphasized creating scalable models and influencing the workforce field to implement them more widely.

The still-unfolding Year Up story offers many lessons on how an astute learning organization can recognize approaching limits and retool its services to negotiate these limits. Section 4 examines lessons from Year Up's experience with growth. Section 5 then describes the broader reformulation in approaches growing from Year Up's expanded mission.

4. Scaling the Year Up Core Program

Our analysis of Year Up's experience scaling its core program considers three topics: increasing recruitment; scaling signature core program services; and addressing cross-cutting challenges in staffing and managing for growth.

4.1 Scaling Recruitment

Year Up is one of nine career pathways programs being evaluated in the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) project. The PACE design required increasing recruitment by 50 percent over two six-month recruitment cycles to generate a randomly assigned control group. The general window for recruitment ran from January 2013–July 2014, with some offices beginning sooner than others, based on a determination of readiness.

Year Up knew that its urban locations were home to large populations of low-income 18- to 24-year-olds with high school credentials and limited career opportunities. But it did not know what it would take to find youth who were motivated and able, with program support, to handle a demanding full-time year of academics and work experience. Staff were skeptical that simply doing more of the same—mainly community outreach and word-of-mouth—would suffice. But they were uncertain what to do differently to generate a 50-percent increase across two six-month recruitment cycles.

It also was unclear how much could be accomplished simply by putting more applicants through the current screening process, and how much the process might need strengthening to keep potential applicants engaged.

Before PACE, Year Up increased recruitment in sync with planned growth at each office, typically in increments of about 40 students (by cohort). Local offices largely devised their own recruitment strategies. The challenge in PACE—to increase recruitment by 50 percent in all offices at the same time—required a more concerted, organization-wide approach.

Seeing an opportunity to build knowledge on scaling recruitment, the Administration for Children and Families provided Year Up with $1.5 million to support expanded applicant screening and national marketing. Year Up used these funds to hire a firm to design, test, and implement new marketing strategies. Year Up's national staff also developed an online tracking tool ("Admissions Tracker") and increased local admissions staff.

As part of the PACE implementation study, evaluation staff explored experiences with recruitment in interviews with national and local Year Up staff. The following sections summarize key findings.

- **Year Up successfully met the increased recruitment goals.**

All nine core program offices met the 50-percent increase goal. Importantly, they did so without lowering standards for admitted students. As seen in Exhibit 3, the program remained highly selective—there was little change in average acceptance rates during or immediately after the period of intensified recruitment

for PACE.[6] Thus, Year Up staff increased recruitment by expanding the number of applications from the target population, rather than by digging deeper into existing applicant pools (and potentially recruiting youth less suited to the program). As a result, the characteristics and outcomes of admitted students changed little, as seen in trends for assessed risks, program completions, and positive post-program outcomes.

Exhibit 3.   Trends in Selected Outcomes for the Core Program Before, During, and After PACE* (Average Across Local Offices)
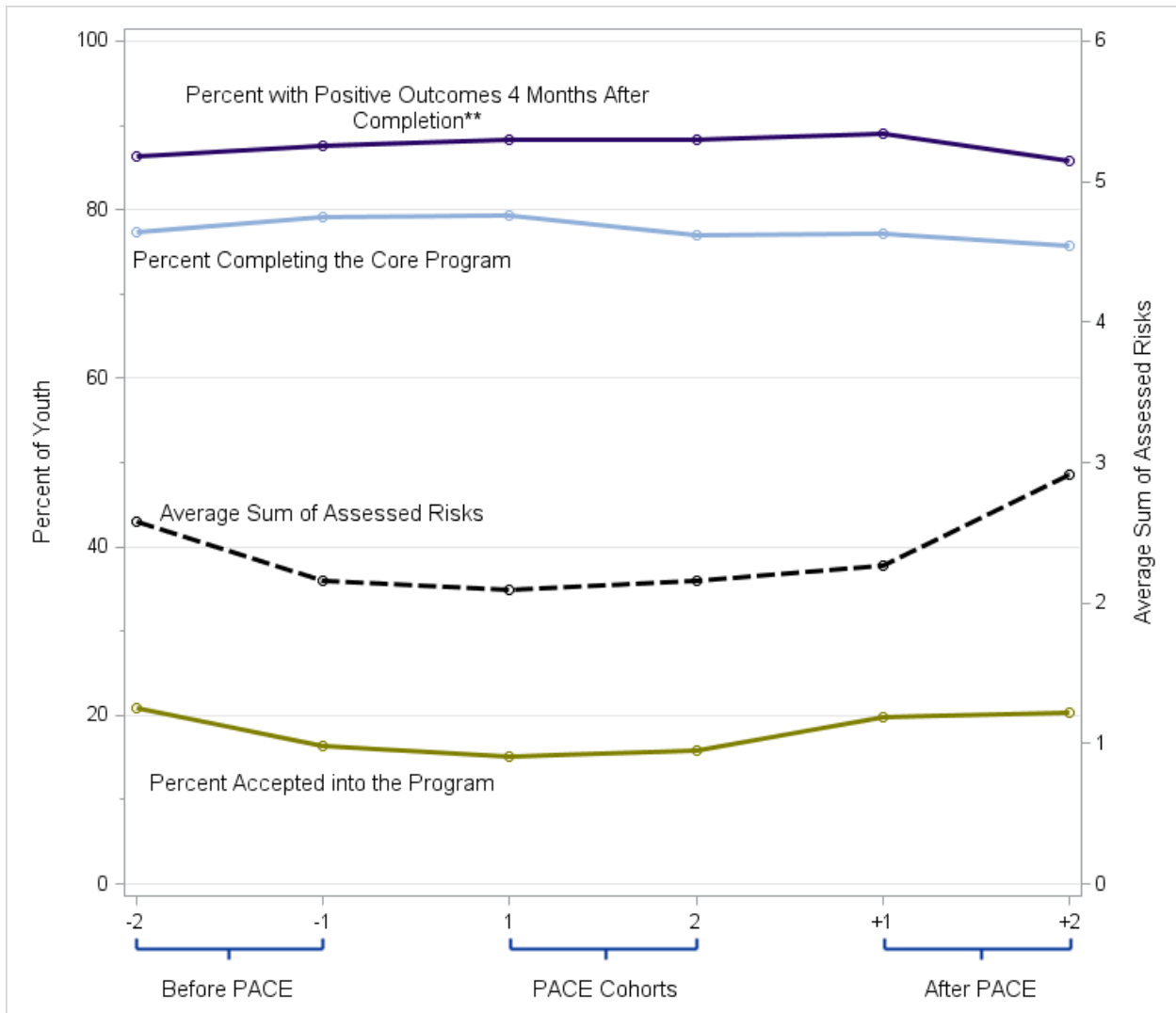
Source: Abt Associates calculations from Year Up micro-data extracts.
* Local offices conducted PACE recruitment for two consecutive six-month cycles starting at varying times between January 2013 and July 2014.
** See note in Exhibit 2 for definition.

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6   The period of active PACE recruitment varied somewhat across locations but generally occurred between January 2013 and July 2014.

Success in scaling up recruitment required an extraordinary mobilization of staff throughout the organization. National staff worked intensively with local Year Up admissions teams to meet the PACE goals.

- **An outside look at current practices provided fresh ideas on message and strategies.**

The marketing agency that Year Up hired started with an audit of existing recruitment approaches. Based on interviews and focus groups with multiple stakeholders, the firm identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and then formulated marketing strategies accordingly.

The new marketing materials promoted a more consistent message about the program. This message stressed positive employment outcomes, while also emphasizing the program's rigor and expectations. The firm created an extensive set of materials suitable for marketing through different channels (e.g., online, radio, etc.) and reinforcing a common brand. It then helped designed a marketing campaign providing tests of a wide range of online and traditional media approaches. The firm used data from digital advertising and Year Up applications to assess the yield and cost-effectiveness of each strategy.

- **The campaign generated valuable knowledge on how to reach the young adults that Year Up targets.**

Experience with a range of electronic media produced important discoveries and insights. Some online job boards—notably Craigslist and Snagajob—proved highly productive, while others (e.g., Monster.com) did not. Google "retargeting" (i.e., follow-up ads targeting initial website viewers) was productive, while paid search and mobile in-app banners were not. Social media-based outreach (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) via students currently in the program and alumni proved unproductive—a surprising result given high social media activity rates of young adults in Year Up's target population and a generally supportive alumni community. Advertisements through traditional media (e.g., radio, newspaper, television) proved to be costly and yielded few applicants.

Most applicants continued to mark "word-of-mouth" on applications as the main way they learned about the program. In retrospect, staff decided that more concerted efforts to engage alumni through social media would have helped. They concluded that more-proactive engagement with parents, other family members, and community referral partners also would be beneficial.

At the same time, application decisions often appear to spring from multiple influences. For example, the marketing firm's data showed that many applicants who marked "word-of-mouth" also had investigated a variety of online advertising sources.

- **Marketing firms can provide critical support in a campaign, but cannot substitute for staff on the ground.**

Year Up and the marketing firm initially had different expectations for what the firm would accomplish. Year Up expected the firm's work in local markets to generate most of the increase in applications needed to meet recruitment targets. The firm, after learning more about Year Up's local admissions processes and environments, decided that it was best equipped to develop general strategies and supports and rely on local staff to tailor and apply them in their environments.

Neither side fully anticipated the difficulty of converting initial interest into actual applications and then maintaining applicants' engagement through Year Up's intensive, multistage screening process. As these challenges became evident, Year Up's national staff implemented a centralized monitoring and

troubleshooting approach. At its center was a statistical tool—the "Admissions Tracker"—that provided weekly measures of progress at successive stages in the recruitment pipeline in each local office. The tool helped national and local staff track progress and address problems in a timely manner.

- **More efficient targeting approaches would help to support more dramatic scaling of selective programs.**

Year Up's approach to recruitment requires great effort because its target population is dispersed in large cities and because Year Up's admissions process relies on in-person interviews and assessments. The process's successive stages also make it vulnerable to attrition from competing opportunities and life events. The overall admissions ratio of about one enrollee for every five applicants shown in Exhibit 3 suggests that staff must spend substantial time and resources on young adults who are not a good fit, with costs for the program and young adults alike.

Year Up might improve efficiency in recruitment in at least two ways. First, it could create more direct routes into the program for the target population—for example, through relationships with particular high schools, adult education programs, and colleges (who might refer borderline applicants or dropouts). Second, it could shorten its screening process by using simpler assessment tools and, perhaps, by testing ways that applicants could self-screen to see if they would be a good fit.

Streamlining recruitment in such ways likely would involve tradeoffs. For example, there would be less time for applicants to bond with each other and program staff at the outset, for staff to get key services in place for individual students, and for students to adjust to new opportunities and expectations.

- **It can be valuable to test expansion of selected components—in this case, recruitment—before scaling up entire programs.**

Expanding recruitment for PACE in all nine core program offices was a huge effort, requiring hard work throughout the organization. At the same time, it offered a valuable opportunity to learn what it takes to scale up this critical component of the program. Because additional recruits were assigned to a control group (i.e., meeting admissions criteria but not allowed to receive Year Up services), the organization was able to learn a great deal about expanding recruitment without having to simultaneously grapple with challenges in scaling other program components. In addition to insights into specific marketing and engagement strategies, the experience helped Year Up to see where greater standardization in processes was needed across local offices. In one national staff member's words, "Getting to think about our recruitment and admissions process was huge. It started a dialog about marketing. It allowed us to have a closer look at our pipeline. That was a big victory."

The possibility of diverting excess recruits through random assignment or other means makes recruitment easier to isolate for testing scalability that services programs typically must offer as a bundle. Some seemingly bundled components may lend themselves to separate testing, however. An example in Year Up is generating internship opportunities: to test the feasibility of scaling internships, local programs might expand the number of offered slots beyond the number actually needed for a particular cohort. With careful management of employer relationships, the additional slots can be preserved for a subsequent cohort and help to fuel future growth.

4.2   Scaling Major Program Services

Fieldwork for the PACE implementation study followed a period of rapid growth for Year Up's core program. Past and expected future growth were very much on the minds of national and local staffs. This section distills experience scaling signature program services.

- **Growth can stress capacity for nimble curriculum revision—a key strength of non-profit workforce agencies.**

Local instructors in Year Up's core program have substantial room to design training that is responsive to the needs of the program's employer partners. Although courses must meet standards for credit at local partner community colleges, Year Up instructors have flexibility to emphasize particular skills and adopt teaching styles suited to the target population. Suitable teaching approaches include active, project-based learning that minimally relies on lecture; a substantial focus on real-life problems; and a high degree of integration across subjects.

As Year Up grew, it became more challenging to oversee the quality of curricula and instructors at each location. This was especially true for the local offices that stressed continuous improvement to meet skills needed in local job markets. A related challenge was the difficulty of competing with industry salaries in high-demand fields such as information technology, which raised the general level of effort in recruiting enough instructors to keep up with growth. As Year Up looked to expand training into new technical fields, these challenges became more pressing.

In response, Year Up moved to centralize curriculum development and standardize its curricula. A "customer solutions" team began piloting new development approaches, in collaboration with company and college partners. As of early 2015, leaders were actively working through questions about how to structure and staff this capacity.

- **Geographic expansion tends to increase diversity in the characteristics of participants and in access to support services in local communities served.**

Options in localities with higher levels of economic disadvantage and more limited community resources include expanding support services, screening out more applicants who need significant support, or both. Year Up's design affords some flexibility in capacity to expand support services. For example, many offices amplify student services provided by program staff with interns earning their master's in social work from local colleges. In addition, Year Up's learning community model draws on all staff to provide supports at critical junctures. In this model, every staff member is assigned student advisees, creating an important additional layer of supports that students can draw on as need arises. Another strategy in some locations has been screening applicants more stringently to ensure that available program resources would be adequate to meet the needs of admitted students.

- **Learning communities are a promising response to challenges in integrating services tightly as the numbers of staff and students grow.**

Year Up's learning communities organize services into compact units of 40 students who move through the program together. This cohort-based model helps forge strong relationships among students and between students and staff. Events such as Friday Feedback sessions, cohort-based classes, and student advising—particularly during the initial six-month Learning and Development phase—help to cement relationships and a sense of common responsibility for shared values. An important goal is to create an

environment where everyone is mindful and supportive of one another's challenges and successes, during and outside the program.

Learning communities also provide convenient units for scaling. Calibrating to a common learning community size helps in setting recruitment goals and in standardizing planning for needed staffing, space, and other resources.

- **A savvy non-profit with strong business connections can generate a substantial number of internships and revenue from major corporations by appealing to social responsibility and by providing well-prepared interns.**

In 2015, Year Up's core program placed more than 1,800 young adults in internships with major Fortune 500 firms, such as Bank of America, J.P. Morgan, Google, and Salesforce. That year's employer contributions for interns financed 62 percent of the program's average cost of $27,100 per student.

This capacity to connect low-income young adults with major firms—and generate substantial revenue in the process—is virtually unprecedented in a U.S. workforce system that has struggled to engage employers in meaningful ways. Year Up's success is rooted in its leaders' extensive business experience and connections with top corporate executives, as well as a sophisticated approach to placing individual students. Traditionally, Year Up's approach combined an effective appeal to employers' sense of social responsibility with delivery of carefully selected interns with strong workplace skills who might make good future hires.

Replicating this approach is likely to be difficult for non-profit organizations with less well developed business expertise and connections. Year Up is exploring a number of routes to building capacity in the field—through training and technical assistance to other workforce intermediaries. It also is exploring routes to increasing employer demand for well-trained low-income youth on a larger scale than Year Up would address directly, as explained in Section 5.

- **Expanding opportunities more substantially requires a shift from supply- to demand-side thinking.**

As Year Up grew, it became increasingly difficult for every office to secure the internships it needed. A number of locations were barely finding enough slots, starting internships late, and having to accept lower payments for the slots they did find. To a substantial degree, the difficulty appeared to be linked to Year Up's traditional emphasis on social responsibility and CEO-level corporate relationships. Although an impressive number of firms have participated, for most corporate social responsibility could justify supporting only a few interns per cycle. Year Up was not engaging middle-level managers, who were critical to identifying workforce needs and making hiring decisions on that basis, rather than as a social good. As a result, the organization's leaders realized that internship sales teams would have to develop and manage relationships with an ever larger number of employers to keep up with planned growth.

This analysis prompted a basic shift in the internship sales strategy in many offices.[7] Still unfolding, the strategy aims to partner with employers to build "talent pipelines"—providing a larger flow of entry-level

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[7] Several offices began operating on a "talent pipeline" basis with large firms well before the more general shift described here. Their example—involving partnerships with firms like Salesforce and State Street—helped to provide the impetus for the more general shift to a customer solutions approach described in the text above.

workers to meet critical hiring needs. Rather than emphasizing social responsibility, this "customer solutions" approach has program staff working with a broad cross-section of middle and upper managers to identify workforce needs that Year Up interns could meet. In some instances, the approach involves relatively modest changes to better communicate how interns can help fill a company's skill gaps and help it better serve a more diverse customer base. In other instances, Year Up is working with companies to create new training programs for high-demand occupations.

- **Continuing to support program alumni is a promising strategy for boosting impacts, but more immediate concerns often leave scant resources to exploit this opportunity.**

Limited bandwidth and resources cause many innovative programs to miss opportunities to "scale impact" by extending services to alumni. Although modest, Year Up's approach to alumni services is stronger than that of many programs. Staff routinely monitor and assist core program graduates for four months after graduation, working to ensure they take next steps along a career pathway. Year Up also uses local alumni associations and periodic events and celebrations as opportunities to reconnect with alumni. Until recently, however, intense demands on time and financial resources for the program's main services left little capacity to do more for alumni.

Year Up recently launched a creative response to this gap—a revenue-generating subsidiary providing recruitment services to employers. Year Up Professional Resources (YUPRO) aims to extend the program's impact by providing long-term job placement assistance to alumni. Its employer fees will help to expand alumni programming.

4.3   Addressing Cross-Cutting Challenges in Staffing and Managing Growth

This section examines Year Up's response to a number of broader challenges that successful scaling entails. These challenges include maintaining model fidelity, managing staff across increasingly diverse locations, and strengthening data systems and continuous improvement processes.

- **More locations increase the potential for deviation from the program model.**

During much of Year Up's history, expansion to new locations involved getting basic resources in place and ensuring that key program functions were appropriately staffed. Where possible, the organization deployed veteran staff to shape and lead new sites. They helped to transmit values as "culture carriers," in addition to bringing practical know-how in running programs. To a great degree, however, local staffs had substantial control over marketing and recruitment, curriculum development, instruction, student contract structure and monitoring, and employer engagement. The approach reflected a belief that flexibility to adjust to local conditions is key in successful replication.

By 2014–15, national leaders had noticed local practices diverging from the core model more than local conditions seemed to warrant. In some instances, these differences appeared to weaken implementation of key program components and thereby compromise fidelity of the model and the strength of the Year Up "brand." At the least, the national staff found it more difficult to keep track of local variations and their justifications. Leadership reacted by launching an initiative to codify and standardize best practices across sites. Examples include more-prescriptive guidelines on which applicants to admit, a national Year Up professional skills curriculum, a common student contract, and a matrix (multi-level team) approach to coordinating national and local management of internship sales teams (previously managed by local Executive Directors).

In increasing standardization, Year Up leaders sought to preserve local flexibility where it provides functional adaptation to local conditions. As one leader put it, "The key is to do both: standardize and be nimble." Later in this section, we describe how Year Up has used performance benchmarks and other strategies to arrive at a good balance in this regard.

- **Optimal skill sets for local leaders shift as programs mature and grow.**

For much of its history, Year Up recruited local Executive Directors (EDs) with experience in youth development and related services in other non-profit organizations. Their jobs heavily emphasized getting programs in place and working well—largely internal challenges. As the national leaders assessed Year Up's capacity to sustain growth and undertake the next phase of expansion, they concluded that local leaders would need a different skill set to be successful going forward.

The new qualifications for EDs emphasize forging strong external partnerships and fundraising, tasks requiring exceptional sales and relationship skills. Year Up leaders concluded that such skills most often were found in the business, rather than the non-profit, world. Private-sector experience thus has become an important consideration in recruiting local EDs. As an example, one search underway during PACE fieldwork was concentrating on candidates with experience growing a $10-million business—the size of the local office budget involved. Affinity for Year Up's mission is equally critical, however. Thus, the organization looks for seasoned business managers who are interested in refocusing their skills to help low-income youth.

To ensure that shifting EDs' focus to more external matters does not diminish attention to program quality, Year Up created a new position of Site Director at each site. Reporting to the local ED, Site Directors work with other local staff to monitor and maintain strong program standards.

- **Leaders need to master the chemistry of tight teams to neutralize a "hand-off" mentality.**

Growth in programs offering varied services tends to lead to greater specialization and compartmentalization of staff. Although specialization can strengthen services, it also can cause staff to view their responsibilities more narrowly and foster a hand-off mentality across staff units. In contrast, Year Up's core values emphasize shared responsibilities for positive outcomes for students.

Year Up's national leaders see creating tight teams as a critical response to this challenge. On such teams, all staff take responsibility for every student's overall success, in addition to performing their specific jobs well. Year Up leaders have experimented with a variety of approaches to creating tight teams. Strategies include appointing experienced "culture carriers" to key positions at new sites; deploying experts on the national team to troubleshoot rocky local situations, reassigning staff when needed; and stressing shared mission and responsibility for quantitative outcomes. The program also includes explicitly integrative activities as part of its basic structure to promote bonding. Examples include Friday Feedback sessions for all students and staff and assigning student advisees to every staff member to ensure everyone is engaged with all aspects of students' experiences in the program.

Variation in local personalities, office sizes, student characteristics, and other factors makes it hard to come up with a simple formula for tight teams. One national leader described the challenge as fundamentally improvisational: "You're always running around trying to figure it out. We don't have it totally nailed."

- **Align on core values, culture, and an expanding mission.**

Year Up's leaders believe that a strong emphasis on shared values is one way to promote coherence while minimizing micro-management. As one put it, "My approach is to double down on principles so that you don't have to quadruple down on process." The organization has made values and culture unusually explicit throughout its operations and sought to frame its ethos in ways meaningful for students and staff alike.

An example is the pervasive business culture woven throughout Year Up's programs and operations. Instructors introduce and explain "corporate culture" and associated communication skills, including e-mail etiquette, well-focused writing, and public speaking. Learning communities reinforce professional behavior as specified in student contracts. To an unusual degree in the non-profit world, Year Up hires leaders with high-level corporate and management experience who are steeped in business thinking, language, and processes. Leaders refer to Year Up as "the company," aspire to respond to needs at "the speed of business," and pitch ideas based on their "value proposition." They use "investment prospectuses" to raise funds, engage business consultants to guide strategic planning, and manage student data using a leading management information system developed for sales and marketing applications.

- **Well-formulated performance measures can help to promote shared responsibility for outcomes, coordinate program improvements, and resolve tensions between national standards and local practices.**

Year Up has invested substantial resources in a strong performance monitoring system. Experience with this system attests to the crucial role good data can play in supporting program growth. The system provides real-time measures of progress at critical junctures as students flow through the program. The measures allow managers to monitor the build-up of admitted students prior to the start of each course, retention in each of the two main program phases, and post-program employment and education outcomes. Separate indicators monitor staff progress in securing internship positions and raising other funds to support the organization. An easily remembered acronym helps Year Up staff keep performance outcomes in focus: FM RADIO (Financial Management, Retention, Admissions, Development, Internships, and Positive Outcomes).

Within and across specialized staff units, leaders have found that focusing attention on outcomes helps to make shared goals clear and concrete—and promote an understanding of the interrelatedness of efforts at various junctures. For example, an initiative to boost retention led local admissions teams to assess and refine standards for admission (e.g., the program's capacity to support students facing varying personal and family challenges), as well as to strengthen supports provided during the L&D phase (e.g., monitoring and timely response to early contract infractions). Retention also links directly to revenue in the Year Up model, since only students completing L&D enter internships, which in turn generate employer payments.

Year Up has learned that strong performance measures provide a useful tool for deciding when local managers must adhere more or less closely to national standards. As one national leader put it: "Hitting the FM RADIO is the price of freedom. If you hit it, I will clear almost everything I can, whether it is experimenting with something outside the box or hiring more people."

- **Continuous improvement is as much about communication and process as it is about data and analysis.**

Good data can help identify areas needing strengthening. But effective learning organizations must instill values and processes supporting the use of evidence in continuous improvement. Year Up's values put substantial emphasis on "strive to learn" and support a "culture of feedback" for staff and students alike. Processes for continuous improvement include regular cross-site calls among staff specialists in different areas (e.g., admissions, student services, academic program, and internship support), "no-blame look-backs" between sessions, organization-wide retreats, ongoing surveys of employer and student experiences, and regular discussions with employers. National staff members collect and distill best practices on key program components as "playbooks"—living documents that make operating guidelines and best practices generally accessible.

Year Up's experience attests also to the value of external relationships in supporting organizational learning. Leaders actively participate in professional conferences. They welcome creative partnerships—for example, in 2015 Year Up provided data for MBA student teams from around the country to mine as part of the Wharton People Analytics Case Competition. Strategic planning collaborations with the Monitor Deloitte and Bridgespan groups have provided substantial support in developing growth strategies. A partnership with Abt Associates is amplifying capacity for rigorous evaluation of Year Up's core and Professional Training Corps programs.

- **Scaling up requires an agile national organization.**

By 2014–15, Year Up's national infrastructure was experiencing increasing stress from expansion to new locations, increased size and specialization at existing locations, new occupational tracks and program models, and an expanding mission. The general level and complexity of associated management demands had increased.

One way Year Up responded to these "textbook growth challenges" (as one leader described them) was an ongoing series of revisions to the national organizational chart. Year Up's board approved a new position of President. This change increased capacity to direct day-to-day operations and freed Year Up's founder to expand his work with external stakeholders and concentrate more on thought leadership. Year Up substantially remapped organizational units and lines of reporting to fit emerging approaches and functions. For example, national Site Directors now manage local core and PTC projects by region, whereas separate national leads previously administered them as two separate programs. A national unit now manages internship sales staff in a matrix arrangement involving local EDs, whereas previously most sales staff had reported directly to EDs.

Keeping up with growth and organizational changes also has required rapid hiring at both the national and local levels. One result has been a younger staff who are less familiar with local program operations. To ensure that national staff understand local operations, Year Up requires each new employee to spend six months working as a member of one of the program's learning communities in a local office during his or her first two years. As of early 2015, Year Up also had started planning for an internal training academy to be focused on new employees.

- **Rapid growth requires strong capacity for expanded fundraising.**

Year Up's development team is well positioned to leverage the organization's connections with business executives active in the venture philanthropy world. The organization's communication style is well suited to such funders, emphasizing familiar business concepts such as "investment prospectus," "growth capital,"

"value proposition," and "business case." Fundraising leverages Year Up's strong personal connections with venture philanthropists and puts strong emphasis on the challenges and successes of individual participants. The organization also has a strong record in applying for federal funds with an innovation focus—notably, the Corporation for Community and National Service's Social Innovation Fund. Year Up leaders have proven to be adept at recruiting and training new development staff to expand capacity. Given this experience and capacity, leaders believe Year Up is capable of raising the significant resources that will be needed to support rapid growth.

At the same time, the organization has realized that continued reliance on philanthropy for a substantial portion of program costs ultimately will limit the scale the core program can reach. As discussed in the next section, one response is a college-based adaptation of the core model—the Professional Training Corps—that is designed to be financially self-sustaining.

5. Addressing the Limits to Growth in Year Up's Core Program

As the preceding sections demonstrate, Year Up's core program has provided a sturdy platform for growth and generated valuable knowledge on scaling. At the most general level, this experience offers an instructive example of how a strong learning organization can recognize when its legacy program has reached its limits and pivot to new approaches in a timely fashion.

As part of this pivot, Year Up reformulated its mission to reflect expanded goals. Whereas its objectives previously were to build "bridges to opportunity," the new mission calls for broader efforts to close the "opportunity divide":

> *Millions of young adults in the U.S. have talent and motivation, but lack opportunity. At the same time, companies have opportunities available, but lack the talent they need to succeed.*
>
> —Year Up website

Year Up's revamped strategy combines ambitious experimentation and expansion in direct services with stepped-up efforts to influence wider policies and practices in the field. By 2021, Year Up plans to increase direct services to 10,000 young adults annually—a fourfold increase over the number served in 2015—through expansion at current and future college-based (Professional Training Corps) sites.

After noting a few key aspects of these plans in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, Section 5.3 describes some of the ways in which Year Up is applying its direct-service expertise in wider field building.

5.1 Stand-Alone Programs as Ongoing Laboratories for Innovation

Seeking to move away from models requiring ongoing infusions of philanthropic support, Year Up recently decided to cease expansion of its core program (i.e., stand-alone sites). The decision was motivated by a desire to concentrate development on self-sustaining models to facilitate dissemination in wider workforce systems.

Operations will continue at existing core sites, however. These sites provide good laboratories for innovation, because Year Up has direct control over all aspects of their operation. For example, core program sites are good candidates for testing new approaches to instruction and curriculum because Year Up develops its own curricula and hires and manages instructors at these locations.[8] The capacity to develop and introduce new training "at the speed of business" is a key requirement for re-establishing relationships with employers on a "customer solutions" basis.

This approach starts with discussions with employers to identify skills shortages that could be met by motivated young adults with a modest amount of customized training. The next step is to assess what revisions existing curricula need to address specific employers' needs. In some cases, it might be a matter of more clearly showing that skills already instilled map well to positions employers seek to fill. In other cases, tweaks to existing courses, additional workshops, or week-long "boot camps" might be enough to cover specific technical skills (e.g., scheduling meetings with Outlook). At the other end of the spectrum,

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[8] Year Up also is testing new curricula in many of the PTC sites.

customer solutions might require adding a new course or a new occupational track in an emerging technical field. Recent and developing curricula include entry-level training in digital advertising, computer programming, cyber security, marketing, and business management.

At a basic level, Year Up is tackling a series of questions about what kind of curriculum development capacity it should create and maintain. These questions include how to decide when existing college programs are adequate; how much and what kind of in-house expertise is needed; how much responsibility for refinement and revision to leave to local staff; how to coordinate with employers, college faculty, and college accreditation processes; and how to decide when there is enough demand from employers to justify developing new courses and tracks.

Decisions about training in new fields inevitably raise questions about how much training can be provided in a one-year program. A number of emerging mid-skill occupations require more preparation and training than Year Up traditionally has provided in its one-year program. Among the responses Year Up has considered, one possibility is to screen applicants more stringently for some fields to identify those who already have more substantial training and skills at the outset. Another approach is to adapt curricula so that more instruction can be provided in the time available—for example, through accelerated courses and by adding short courses and workshops between sessions and during internships. Employers in some sites have offered to continue training as part of internships, and some may be willing to continue training after graduation. Year Up's customer solution team is actively exploring these varied possibilities.

5.2   Adapting Stand-Alone Programs for Integration in Other Institutional Settings

In 2011, Year Up launched the first of a series of pilots adapting key core program services to operate in a college setting. One model—the Professional Training Corps (PTC)—is proving to be especially viable.

PTC is a one-year program offering services very similar to Year Up's core program—six months of training and supports, followed by a six-month internship. The main difference is that, rather than operating as independent sites, Year Up partners with colleges who provide academic and technical instruction, additional support services, and space for Year Up staff and program activities.[9] A steadily growing number of colleges—seven, as of early 2016—are hosting PTC programs. To date, programs have been small (typically two 40-student cohorts a year), and the emphasis has been on learning to implement programs well before increasing their size.

The PTC model is designed to be financially self-sustaining. With lower costs for staff, overhead, and student stipends, internship revenue from employers exceed costs after programs grow to two learning communities—provided they meet retention and internship sales targets. The assumption is that colleges also will see the model as financially viable, given expectations of increased tuition revenues from enrollments during and following PTC. The main attraction for colleges is an opportunity to further their missions by improving students' completion rates and labor market outcomes.

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[9]   Other differences include a somewhat simpler admissions process (mainly substituting college placement exams for the learning assessment that Year Up staff conduct in the core program) and lower weekly stipends.

For Year Up, shared responsibilities with colleges create new challenges in maintaining model fidelity. Close collaboration with college administrators is needed to optimize approaches to curricula, instruction, admissions, advising, and student services. New approaches may be needed to forge strong learning communities, given that PTC students spend less time with Year Up staff and one another than their counterparts in the core program.

Year Up and the colleges also must negotiate differences in culture and mission. Although united in their commitment to help young adults succeed in careers, Year Up's goals emphasize full-time employment and part-time school after one year, whereas colleges are likely to see full-time school and quicker college completion as more desirable.

In the longer term, as Year Up and its college partners address these questions, attention will turn to increasing the size of PTC programs. Again, there are a variety of approaches to consider. One general direction is to expand the current program by increasing numbers in existing occupational tracks and adding new fields of study. Another strategy would be aim to institutionalize the model—or key aspects—more thoroughly in college systems, by transferring functions Year Up staff currently provide to college staff. Under the latter approach, Year Up's role might shift from providing direct services to enabling, training, and ongoing technical assistance.

5.3 Applying Experience with Direct Services to Influence the Workforce Field More Broadly

Emerging theoretical frameworks for scaling social programs distinguish between strategies for extending the reach of individual programs—often by increasing the size and number of sites—and strategies for applying knowledge and influence to achieve more-systemic impacts.[10] Year Up is pioneering the idea that well-positioned non-profits can contribute on both fronts.

In 2014, Year Up fashioned a multi-faceted "influence agenda" with assistance from the Bridgespan Group, a non-profit organization aiming to help mission-driven organizations scale impact. The still-evolving agenda builds on Year Up's past influence efforts, including a variety of approaches recommended in a 2014 Bridgespan paper on "Transformative Scale."[11]

One category of field-building strategies aims to raise awareness and improve the performance of existing players. Year Up has joined forces with a variety of organizations to increase awareness in the business community of the potential talent represented by young adults from low-income backgrounds and the importance of focusing on the demand side of the "opportunity divide." To drive market demand through systems change, Year Up has played a leading role in the Grads of Life project, a national marketing

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[10]   For example, Bradach & Grindle (2014) distinguish between "organizational pathways" and "field-building pathways"; Clark et al. (2012) distinguish between "replication" and "non-replication" strategies; and Fixsen et al. (2013) contrast "direct" and "vertical" approaches, the latter involving wider policy/legal changes.

[11]   Bradach & Grindle (2014).

campaign and technical assistance platform supporting efforts to engage businesses in hiring opportunity youth.[12]

A second category includes efforts to change large public institutions. The most direct example is Year Up's PTC program with its focus on community college systems. In one leader's vision, in five years Year Up will have "30 to 40 community college partners who are all part of a network and fraternity who are figuring out how to improve and refine what we're doing." Leaders also cited other recent efforts to "change the infrastructure that the field responds to," such as lobbying for performance-based funding in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and initial planning to test Pay for Success approaches.

A third category includes activities to influence public policy. In concert with other organizations, Year Up is advocating for demand-focused approaches to workforce policy and federal programs. As part of this work, Year Up has made a substantial commitment to rigorous evaluation to build evidence supporting policy changes. Two major random assignment studies currently are under way—a large test of the core program as part of the PACE evaluation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) and a study of developing PTC models (U.S. Department of Education).

A fourth strategy involves demonstrating how for-profit models can be applied to scale social programs. Year Up's unique connections to the business world have led to a number of promising strategies described earlier in this report. Notably, it is demonstrating how internships and alumni job placement services can generate revenue sufficient to substantially or fully cover the costs of expensive programs.

A final pathway to transformative change involves promoting positive societal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors about opportunity youth. In this regard, Year Up's agenda is focused particularly on changing employers' views. A cornerstone initiative, the "diamond client" program, involves demonstrating the feasibility of employer engagement in Year Up's internship programs on a larger scale. The goal of this program is to recruit at least 50 large employers willing to take 50 interns and hire at least half of them. In addition to demonstrating feasibility, the goal is to establish a cadre of powerful CEOs who are eager to champion the business case for expanded employment of opportunity youth more broadly.

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[12]   The initiative, launched in September 2014, seeks to educate the broader public on the business case for seeing "opportunity youth" as a valuable and underutilized source of workforce talent. There is an independent website for the Grads of Life campaign, which houses a partner directory, toolkits, and best practice models that employers can use to develop new talent pipelines for young adults who have not yet graduated from college. See http://gradsoflife.org/.

6.   Conclusions

Beyond a wide variety of useful practical lessons on scaling, Year Up's experience affords a valuable window into organizational traits conducive to successful growth.

One such set of traits entails capacity for self-analysis and continuous improvement. Year Up's experience attests to what a strong learning organization can accomplish when it pushes itself to its limits, assesses those limits, and undertakes major revisions based on the results. It exemplifies well how learning can become a core value generating substantial productive activity.

Another set of conducive traits embodied in Year Up is its fusion of commitment to advancing society with a highly entrepreneurial outlook. Passion to help others and an embrace of business values and practices are not typically attributes found driving the same organization. The mix of the two in Year Up helps explain many of its promising approaches to growth, as well as its success in engaging for-profit companies in its work.

Whether and how these attributes can be replicated remains to be seen. In striving to leverage its experience with direct-service models to influence change more widely, Year Up is exploring how it might provide training, leadership development, and technical assistance to the field. It also is working with outside researchers to understand better the workings, impacts, and scalability of its programs.

This report is one product of that knowledge-building enterprise. Other projects include ongoing rigorous evaluations of the Year Up core and PTC programs, related applications of improvement science, and work to establish the business case for investing in opportunity youth. As one national leader explained it, Year Up would like to become a "center for workforce excellence" providing robust evidence on practices and impacts to support wider adoption of effective models.

Findings in this report suggest it is making substantial progress toward that end.

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