

Exposure Represents the First Step to Learning



BY CHEVONNE N. BOYD, COMMUNITY OUTREACH COORDINATOR FOR JOBS FOR DELAWARE GRADUATES, INC.

IN PURSUIT OF FINANCIAL FREEDOM, young people are discovering there are many barriers to entering the workforce. Leading the way is the gap in fundamental soft skills that make it difficult for employers to retain adolescents and young adults. “According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Delaware’s unemployment rate is 4.3 percent, however the youth unemployment rate is 14.8 percent, and minority teen unemployment is an eye-opening 24.8 percent. Unemployed youth don’t fare better as they get older. Studies show that it gets more challenging to find work if you haven’t worked during your teenage years” (Leishman, 2017). So how do we counter the increasing rates and trends in youth employment? We increase young people’s exposure to the world of work and strengthen the skills necessary to compete in the changing economy.

For many students, especially those with significant barriers, the road to higher education and employment can look vastly different. Consequently, employment opportunities are based on their capacity to leverage education, skills and abilities to gain and sustain jobs that will provide livable wages. By providing students with opportunities to connect the dots between school and work, we can change the trajectory of how young people perceive employment and perform in the workplace.

Programs like Jobs for Delaware Graduates, Inc. (JDG) work to address the need for soft-skill and employment training for middle and high school students. JDG is a non-profit, dropout prevention program designed to prepare at-risk youth to transition from school to work. The program implements a comprehensive curriculum based on 37 fundamental employability areas including critical thinking, employment interviews, business etiquette, pay and benefits, workplace diversity, and financial planning.

To reinforce skills delivered in the classroom, JDG recently piloted an internship program, known as C.O.R.E. (Creating Opportunities through Real Experiences), to help students gain the confidence to perform in the working world. Through a partnership with Christiana Care Health System, Integrity Staffing Solutions, Bloom Energy, and Goodwill Industries, JDG developed an experiential learning placement program that would allow 11th and 12th grade students to shadow with experienced professionals from a list of traditional and non-traditional fields. The C.O.R.E. Internship Program facilitates learning in ways that keeps students motivated to graduate with the skills they need for



the future. From clinical engineering to culinary arts, participants gain exposure to real-world situations that help them explore career options, sharpen their professional skills, develop positive attitudes around employment, and make informed decisions about their post-secondary pursuits.

The JDG model has been replicated in 34 states with over 1000 program affiliates. Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG) is a state-based national non-profit organization dedicated to preventing dropouts among young people who are most at-risk. In more than three decades of operation, JAG has delivered consistent, compelling results – helping nearly three-quarters of a million young people stay in school through graduation, pursue post-secondary education, and secure quality jobs leading to career advancement opportunities.

The value of youth employment opportunities has proven to benefit the student, community and local economy. Students who gain industry knowledge with applications in the field strengthen their ability to perform and compete for jobs, college, and scholarships on a higher level. Employers who are willing to partner with programs like Jobs for Delaware Graduates, help to strengthen the pipeline of talent that will occupy positions throughout Delaware in the coming years. ■