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IMPROVING THE SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION

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The Youth Apprenticeship Demonstration Project places young people, beginning in their junior year of high school, in work sites for ten to twenty hours per week in order to teach them both specific work skills and broad personal and social skills. Work experience is carefully planned and supervised and coordinated with school classes. its purpose is to help young people who do not expect to enroll in four-year colleges ("The Forgotten Half") identify career paths that will orient them toward academic achievement and socially responsible behavior. Now in its fourth year of operation, the project is directed by the Cornell Youth and Work Program with a base in Broome County Cooperative Extension.

Research indicates that young people who do not graduate from four-year colleges typically spend the first several years after high school floundering in low-wage, low-skill jobs with no direct connection to a future career (Osterman). The approach used in the Youth Apprenticeship Demonstration Project was inspired by European apprenticeship systems—especially Germany's which I studied for one year (Hamilton).

The four-year program takes the high school junior through high school and two years of community college. We began by choosing three occupational areas in which needs were projected for workers with more than high school education but less than four years of college: health care; administration and office technology; and manufacturing and engineering technology.

We are currently engaged in transferring responsibility from Cornell to a local organization, the School and Business Alliance (SABA). We began the project expecting that extension would not be appropriate as a permanent base because apprenticeship is too resource intensive. Taking it over permanently as a large-scale project would skew extension priorities. Instead, extension acted as an incubator, supporting research and development initiated at Cornell.

Project Lessons

Naturally, the project was designed to provide the best possible experience for participants, but it was also intended to generate new knowledge. Research has allowed us to monitor and improve the

project. Research also grounds our response to three key questions we set out to explore:

Do Young People Benefit?

The first and most important question is whether young people benefit from planned and supervised work-based learning related to their schooling. The record of school courses taken, grades received, and enrollment and success in post-secondary education is encouraging. Testimony from the apprentices themselves, their parents, teachers and workplace supervisors is overwhelmingly positive. Apprentices take their school work more seriously, plan more carefully for the future, and understand how education opens career paths.

Are Workplaces Feasible Learning Environments?

The second question is whether it is feasible to use workplaces as learning environments for youth. Here, too, the results are unequivocal. Although workplace supervisors and managers must be creative and dedicated to find the right balance between exploration and production, the learning opportunities are rich and rewarding. Furthermore, many adults are quite competent at coaching youth apprentices and greatly stimulated by the experience.

Is the Program Too Demanding for Employers?

A third question is whether providing learning opportunities for youth makes unrealistic demands on employers. This question is answered in part by the discovery that the program helps create more productive organizations in addition to preparing well-educated, highly-skilled workers—lifelong learners who possess enriched personal and social skills—precisely what employers need to prosper in the future. The question of how employers gain is critical because youth apprenticeship cannot move past the level of small-scale demonstrations unless many employers are willing to accommodate young people. And that will not happen unless they believe it is in their own self-interest to do so.

Cooperative Extension's Role

New legislation provides the opportunity to try this approach on a larger scale. It calls for the creation of school-to-work opportunity systems similar to the youth apprenticeship project, but broader and more comprehensive (Hamilton and Hamilton). The act provides federal support to partnerships involving educators, employers, employees and community organizations. Extension educators can become involved in this initiative in several ways. One is by helping form partnerships. Extension's reputation in most communities is as

an “honest broker” that can be counted on to put the community’s interests above its own. Therefore, it is well placed to bring together the partners specified in the legislation, who typically have little experience working together and consequently do not fully trust each other. Another contribution is providing expertise in youth development, informal education (learning by doing), and staff development for coaches and teachers. Few other organizations can offer this combination.

The Cornell Youth Apprenticeship Demonstration Project exemplifies issues programming, which requires multi-disciplinary and multi-organizational collaboration. Whether in the education of youth or in the service of other community needs, this mode of operation is likely to gain prominence in the future.

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